

Celtis africana

Sterkfontein Country Estates

April 2014

Good day friends of the *Celtis* letter!

Winter is stalking us and pretty soon I will sit and write the letter covered in my thickest winter woollies! This month's letter is about "all kinds of everything" – to steal a line from the old 70's song! I hope you find it interesting.

I have been trying to photograph this little bird for some time now – but it is so flighty and always on the move, I just never had any success. To be honest, bird photography is not easy at all, so many factors make it hard – light, their continuous movement (it's not like it's a human being that you can ask to sit still!), often they are half-hidden amongst foliage etc. These little ones are especially hard to get, they are constantly moving and flitting around.

But then I had some luck the other day and just pressed the shutter continuously - hoping for at least one good one! This little bird is called the Black-chested Prinia and it's usually found around grassland areas and edges of fields. It is not rare or on any endangered list – but so cute and part of the lovely bird species around our Estate. It makes a hard trrrt-trrrt-trrrt continuous kind of sound and it loves insects and nectar from aloes. We have quite a few different species of aloes in our garden so they come in groups of five to seven, flitting from shrubs to nearby aloes to enjoy the nectar.



Black-chested Prinia



Black-chested Prinia

Another bird we often see on our plot is the Rufous-naped lark. This male has been calling all summer long to try and get a female – with no luck. It sits from early in the morning on one of the fluff bushes (pluisbos) calling out, fluffing its head feathers in the best possible punk-style it can think of, flapping its wings, but no one is interested. I do feel sorry for the little guy; I hope by next summer a female may have come along to make him happy! Its habitat is open veld, grasslands and fields and it feeds on insects as well as seeds. The cup shaped nest with a partial or sometimes full dome-like roof, is hidden under a big tuft of grass. See photo in the Afrikaans portion.

Last month I told you to look out for some wild flowers in bloom and showed a photo of the white *Gladeolus permiabilis*. As soon as the *Celtis* letter went out, we found the lovely pink *Gladeolus crassifolius* in bloom on our plot. I could not resist placing a photo of it in this month's letter. Also have a look out for the pretty mauve flowers of the *Babiana hypogea* – it's usually hidden as the flowers are at ground level. The leaves are dull green distinctly ribbed. Both these plants flower summer to autumn, so one should see them around. The *Anthericum fasciculatum* are still in flower (**see *Celtis* of March 2014**) as well, so look out for these lovely indigenous species on our Estate. See photos in the Afrikaans portion.

The more I read about insects, the more interesting I find them. When I was younger I could never understand why anyone would want to study insects and their behaviour and actually make it their calling in life. However, for their size I think insects may be of the smartest animals on the planet! Of course

they evolved over millions of years to be so well adapted, but I think they are just fascinating.

Something that is very interesting and which I found quite a few examples of, is this little “foam nest” attached to grass. This is the hideaway for the nymph of the spittlebug (*Prosapia bicincta*). They are also known as froghoppers. On very close inspection (they are really tiny) the little nymph’s face gives the appearance of a tiny frog.

The adult spittlebug is the world champion in the high jump of the insect world. It can jump to an astronomical height of 70cm – compared to its size, this certainly is astronomical! The cat flea that can jump to a height of 34cm held the previous record. However, a British scientist, Malcolm Burrows of The University of Cambridge by using a camera that could take 2000 photos per second have proved that the new world champion is the spittle bug. The photos showed this little bug can increase its speed when jumping at such a rate, that its body is subjected to a force of gravity of 400 times of that of the earth! Pilots of fighter planes only have to suffer a force of gravity ten times that of the earth – and that whilst wearing special pressure suits! Are insects amazing or what?

There are about 23 000 known species of spittlebugs, yet few people have actually seen one. The foam nest is a clever way for the little nymph to hide in. Spittlebug nymphs can turn a liquid secretion into bubbles by moving or pumping their bodies. Once the bubbles have formed, they use their hind legs to cover themselves with the froth. This foam covers the nymph entirely, providing it with a temporary home, which is safe even from heavy rain. The waxy substance of this shelter is constantly being renewed as the spittlebug nymph feeds and excretes. The ‘spittle’ is thought to serve multiple purposes like shielding it from predators, insulating it from extreme temperatures and even heavy rainfall and it also prevents it from dehydrating. How clever is that?

Spittlebug eggs are laid in late summer and are left to over winter on plant debris. The eggs will hatch in early spring and go through five instars, or stages, before becoming adults. When the nymphs originally hatch in early spring, they will attach themselves to a plant and begin feeding. They are a wingless, green creature at this point and are almost invisible inside the nest – we managed to open one of these nests to photograph the little nymph.

The adults resemble a large fly and are dull in colour from tan to brown or black. However, once again Mother Nature decided that maybe some colour would be interesting so a few brightly coloured species does exist! They inhabit trees, shrubs and taller grasses and if found in your garden, damage is usually minimal as populations are small enough and no pesticide is necessary. Should heavy infestations occur in your garden, a strong blast from the hose would usually dislodge the nest from the plant.

Sometimes in heavy infestations on trees (they love pine trees) they feed on large quantities of sap in order to provide adequate nourishment. In such

cases the host trees drip with the substance and we get the phenomenon known as 'rain trees'.

Imagine being called a spittlebug! But then, considering where the liquid is **actually** secreted from, (the other end!) it is probably a better choice!



Foam nest of the spittlebug



Spittlebug nymph

Quote: “If we were to wipe out insects alone on this planet, the rest of life and humanity with it would mostly disappear from the land. Within a few months.” – E.O. Wilson, American biologist, researcher, theorist, naturalist, author and two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

For some time now we have been getting reports from visiting clients and friends that they have seen the eagles around SCE158. Leon Bylsma also told me he had seen it around his plot. We have also seen them a couple of times in that general area atop a tree or soaring in the sky and we are just happy that they seem to love our Estate! They must be getting ready to nest around that area, as they have been sitting on trees a lot in that area. Let's hope they can have another undisturbed and successful breeding season on our Estate! And how clever are they for rotating their nesting area. By the time their chick has left the nest, the poor top of the tree had definitely seen better days, so now it has a chance of re-growing foliage – nature sure is amazing!

We have seen the youngster flying around alone, calling out, some time ago. Then at some stage he or she was sitting forlornly-looking on the empty nest with a stick in it's beak, not too sure what to do next. But it obviously realised mummy and daddy are not going to provide anymore ... there comes a time when every child must leave home! Eventually it flew off; hopefully to find a mate and who knows, just maybe it will bring it back here too! Wouldn't that be great!

Hallo vriende van die *Celtis* brief!

Stadig maar seker is winter besig om ons te bekruipe en een van die dae sit ek hier met 'n spul dik, ongemaklike klere die brief en skryf! Die maand se brief gaan oor dit en dat en alles en nog wat – ek hoop julle geniet dit!

Ek probeer al lank om hierdie klein voëltjie af te neem en was uiteindelik nou die dag suksesvol. Die foto's hier bo is van die Swartband langstertjie. As 'n reël is voëls moeilik om af te neem - mens kan hul tog nie vra om bietjie stil te sit nie! Hulle is ook meestal half verskuil agter blare of die lig is net nie reg nie. Geduld en tyd is natuurlik ook faktore! Voëls sit min lank genoeg op een plek om regtig goeie foto's te kry en soms is mens net gelukkig.

Nou die dag het ek eenvoudig besluit ek **gaan** 'n foto kry en het toe die kameraknoppe net 'n klomp keer gedruk in die hoop dat ek darem een bruikbare foto kan kry! Die voëltjie is eintlik baie klein en maak aaneen sulke harde trrrt-trrrt-trrrt klanke. Dit maak nes in lang gras of lae struik en leef van insekte en nektar van aalwyne. Mens hoor gewoonlik net die geroep en sien beweging in die struik, maar hulle is so aan die gang, mens sien hul nie sommer mooi nie. Hulle habitat is yl savanne, graslande en landerye. Hulle kom gewoonlik in groepies van vyf of so voor. Ons het heelwat aalwyn

spesies in ons tuin, so dis lekker om dop te hou hoe hulle die nektar kom geniet.

Nog 'n oulike voëltjie wat hier rond gevind word, is die rooineklewerikkie. Op ons plot kom sit 'n mannetjie van vroeg tot laat, die hele somerlank al, op 'n pluïsbos en roep na 'n nooi, maar die is nêrens te vinde nie. Hy klap sy vlerkies, rys sy kopvere in die beste "punk" styl wat hy kan bedink, roep aanmekaar maar al wat uitkom is 'n wyfie. Ek voel jammer vir die arme knapie - hopelik kom daar volgende somer 'n vroultjie van êrens as 'n maat vir hom! Die voël kom voor in graslande, yl savanne, landerye en leef van insekte sowel as saadjies. Die nessesie is 'n kelkvorm met 'n gedeeltelike of volle koepeldak en word gewoonlik in 'n groot graspol versteek.



Rooineklewerik



Verlede maand het ek jul vertel om uit te kyk vir veldblomme wat nou in blom is. Net nadat die *Celtis* gepubliseer is, het ons die pragtige pienk *Gladeolus crassifolius* hier op ons plot sien blom en ek kon dit nie weerstaan om 'n paar foto's daarvan in te sluit nie. Die mooi perskleurige *Babiana hypogea* (Bobbejaanuintjie of bobbejaankalkoentjie) blom ook hierdie tyd – beide genoemde plante blom laatsomer tot herfs, so kyk gerus uit vir die mooi plante. Die blare is vaalgroen en gerib en die blom self lyk of dit uit die grond kom. Die wit *Anthericum fasciculatum* (**Celtis Maart 2014**) blommetjies is ook nog orals te sien.



Babiana hypogea



Gladeolus crassifolius

Ek begin dink insekte is van die slimste diertjies op ons planeet. Natuurlik het miljoene jare se evolusie hul so suksesvol in hul doen en late gemaak en hoe meer ek oor hul lees, hoe interessanter word hulle vir my! Toe ek jonger was, kon ek nooit verstaan hoe kan enigiemand oor goggas en hul doen en late wil

gaan studeer nie, nog minder hoe hul dit 'n beroep wil maak nie, maar nou begin ek verstaan – hulle is fassinerend!

Een so 'n insek is die skuimbesie – darem 'n baie mooier naam is die Engelse ene! Al gewonder as jy in die veld stap oor snaakse wit skuimagtige bolletjies wat soms aan die lang grasse klou? Hierdie “skuimnessies” is eintlik net 'n baie oulike wegkruipplek vir die nimfie van hierdie besie. Hierdie nessie beskerm die nimfie, wat piepklein is, baie goed – selfs teen swaar reën! Maak mens die nessie oop sal mens nogals soek vir die nimfie en op hierdie stadium is dit net 'n klein, vlerklose, groen dingetjie. Die gesiggie lyk baie na die van 'n paddatjie en met die wat hul so spring, het hul ook die Engelse naam “Froghopper” gekry.

Die volwasse skuimbesie is die hoogspringkampioen van die insekwêreld. Hierdie knapie kan tot 70cm hoog spring en as mens in ag neem hoe groot die besie is, dan is dit regtig astronomies. Voorheen was die katvlooi die rekordhouer – die kan tot 34cm hoog spring. 'n Britse wetenskaplike, ene Malcolm Burrows van die Universiteit van Cambridge het, met behulp van 'n kamera wat 2000 foto's per sekonde kan neem, egter bewys die skuimbesie is die nuwe kampioen. Die foto's wys ook dat die skuimbesie so vinnig kan versnel wanneer hy spring, dat sy liggaampie aan 400 keer die swaartekrag van die aarde blootgestel word! Vlieëniers in vegvliegtuie moet soms maar 10 keer dit verduur en dan het hulle darem spesiale drukpakke aan! Wie dink nou nie insekte is verstommende diertjies nie?

Daar is ongeveer 23 000 spesies skuimbesies waarvan ons weet, tog het min mense al ooit een gesien. Die skuimbesie kan 'n vloeibare uitskeiding in borrels verander deurdat hulle hul middel van pompbewegings van hul lyfies. Sodra die borrels nou gevorm word, gebruik hulle hul agterbene om hulself heeltemal te oordek daarmee. Hierdie tydelike woning beskerm die besie teen vyande, buitengewone temperature, reën en voorkom ook uitdroging. Die wasagtige stof van die tuiste word voortdurend hernu soos wat die nimf eet en uitskei. Nou hoe slim is **dit**?

Die skuimbesie lê hul eiers in die laatsomer en dit oorwinter dan op plantafval. Die eiers broei vroeglente uit en dit gaan deur vyf fases voordat dit die volwasse stadium bereik. In die begin as die nimf uitbroei, sal hul hulself dadelik aan 'n plant heg en begin voed. Die nimfie is amper onsigbaar klein binne die skuimnessie. Ons het een oopgemaak om te sien hoe lyk die nimfie en kyk maar op die foto hoe klein dit regtig is!

Die volwasse insek lyk baie na 'n vlieg en is gewoonlik bruin, taankleurig of swart, maar natuurlik het Moeder Natuur - soos gewoonlik, vir uitsonderings op die reël gesorg – daar bestaan wel helderkleurige besies! Die skuimbesie se habitat is in bome, langer grassoorte, en struik. Hul kan nie regtig skade doen in jou tuin nie, hul populasies is oor die algemeen klein, so pesbeheer is onnodig. Sou jy wel voel daar is 'n groot infestasië, sal 'n sterk straal van die tuinslang gewoonlik die nessies laat loskom.

Waar groot infestasië by bome (soos bv die denneboom waarvoor hul baie lief is) voorkom, word daar natuurlik op groot skaal sap ingeneem en uitskeiding vind op so groot skaal plaas, dat ons die natuurverskynsel, op Engels bekend as “rain trees”, (reënbome is sekerlik ‘n aanvaarbare vertaling!) kry – die bome drup letterlik van die uitskeidings!

Vir ‘n geruime tyd al vertel kliënte en vriende wat na ons toe kom dat hulle ons arende in die area naby Leon Bylsma en Nick Rosenberg se plotte gewaar. Leon het hul in sy bome sien sit, ons het hulself ‘n paar maal in ‘n boom op Nick se plot sien sit en dis darem lekker om te weet hulle is nog veilig en hier rond. Dit lyk asof hulle veilig voel in ons area en van plan is om hier te bly. Dit lyk ook asof hulle dalk daar rond gaan nesmaak en hopelik sal hulle weereens onversteurd ‘n nuwe Swartborsslangarend kleintjie of twee kan grootmaak. Slim soos hulle is, bly hul ook nie nesmaak op dieselfde plek nie; aan die einde van die vorige broeiseisoen het die arme boom waarin die nes was maar yl en sleg gelyk. Nou kan die boom herstel met nuwe blare en groei. Natuur is maar net wonderlik!

Die arme jong arend het lank in die area van die nes bly vlieg en daar rond gesit. Ons het hom eendag op die nes sien sit met ‘n takkie in die bek – nie juis seker wat om daarmee te maak nie! Vir weke het die arendjie in die lug gesweef en in ‘n skril stem bly roep, maar ma en pa was horende doof, want een of ander tyd moet ‘n kind maar die nes verlaat! Uiteindelik het die besef tot hom deurgedring en het ons hom nie meer gesien nie. Hopelik gaan seek hy ‘n wyfie en bring haar ook na die Estate om te broei – sal dit nou nie bakgat wees nie!

Net vir die grap: Die ou het ‘n duisendpoot as troeteldier. Een oggend sê hy, “Gaan haal my koerant by die hekkie en maak gou.” Na ‘n halfuur is die duisendpoot nog nie terug en vies vlieg hy by die deur uit waar die duisendpoot op die trappie doenig is. “Ek dag ek het jou gesê om my koerant te gaan haal en gou te maak?” “Ja,” antwoord ta, “ek sal nou, ek trek net gou my skoene aan!”

Ek hoop julle het my brief geniet en somer saam met my so bietjie geleer!

Tot volgende maand: Totsiens, goodbye, adios, ciao, yia sas en do svidaniya!

