Celtis africana

Sterkfontein Country Estates

November 2014

Good day Country folk!

The slightest bit of rain turned the veld into green; loads of different wild flowers popped up and everything seemed fresh and new.

It was interesting to see all the millipedes on the road – some crossing Malmani road to the left, others to the right. I wonder why – is it because the "other side" seems greener or is it just because they can! Unfortunately not all of the little fellas make it to the other side – they are just not faster than a car!

I once had a client who's son got a huge yearly stipend from a university in the US to do his doctorate on why millipedes in one part of the world were much larger than in another part – was it a climate thing, diet, or what. To us, as laymen it seem like a really useless thing to study, but of course there is much more to it, i.e. the understanding of the impact of climate on an area etc. Anyway, I think he might be able to explain this interesting phenomenon of some crossing the road to the left, others to the right!

And now, ladies and gentlemen, (drum roll!) let me introduce you to the one, the only (another drum roll):

LITTLE WING!



Circaetus pectoralis chick - 1 month old (photo: Elmarie Krige)

Yep, this is the very first photo of our baby eagle – and look at it, only a mother (and ME!) could love that face. This was taken on 22 October when it was only a month old. The

parents, Henrietta and Kgosi were out hunting and I saw a photo opportunity as I did my morning walk along Malmani road, but boy, it is impossible to come close to it.

It is not the best of photos, I admit, but I had to take it from the road, as this little thing is SO alert! If it just thinks something is coming its way, it will duck and not a feather or any kind of movement is to be seen at the nest. So it was pure luck to get something to show for my patience. And patience I needed, the sun was scorching hot that morning, my dog kept pulling on her leash as she wanted to go home, I had to hide behind a bush near the road and pop out very quickly if I thought the head was showing and the moment I pushed the button, the head was gone and I had a blurry photo! Eventually I got a couple that was useable.

Garfield, jealous of me taking the first pics of the baby, set out a couple of days later with camera and chair, prepared to sit undercover of trees for a long time to try and get a nicer picture. And did he have to sit. And wait! And wait some more. I know how that feels; the photo of Henrietta in last month's edition took as long. I did not even take a chair; I just set out after lunch and hoped to get a good photo, hiding amongst the thick undergrowth under a tree. Ants climbed up my legs, flies tried to get into my eyes and nose, the sharp thorny branches of the tree were prodding and scratching my arms and back, but I dared not move. That photo (which I think is awesome and I certainly got many compliments for it!) was taken after TWO hours' wait - I'm not kidding you! Once again I had to act quickly as she absolutely knew I was around and ducked the second she saw me taking aim. So it was more luck than anything else, but I am certainly very proud of that particular photo.

Back to Garfield and his photo session - eventually, as if by some sixth sense, the little head popped up and it looked to the skies and, lo and behold, there was mom and dad with a nice little snake! They have such excellent eyesight; even though Garfield was well hidden under cover of trees, they flew around in circles and would not come to the nest. He realised he was intruding and rather came back home and I said we are just not to go near the nest for the next couple of weeks. I am very protective of "our" eagles!



"Where the heck are my parents with my food?!" (Photo: Garfield Krige)





"Mama...?" "Dad...?"



"Hang on Little Wing - we're coming and we've got a little snake for you!" (Photos: Garfield Krige)

But look how much it has changed in just three days! The darker brownish coloured feathers have started to come out and the chick grows like it is on steroids! With the heat we have experienced lately the snakes are definitely about, so obviously the parents manage to find food easily.

We already had our first summer visit of a snake inside the house, when a little wolf snake (read about it on the website under Fauna – Sterkfontein Snakes) was curled up in the bathroom next to the TV lounge. And of course, as usual, it was just the workers and myself at home! Luckily it is non poisonous to human beings. It looks much bigger on the photo (my gardener had to pick it up in a spade), as it is a close-up; it was only about the thickness of my index finger. Why it came into the house, only it will know – maybe for a bit of R&R and to watch a spot of TV – who knows?



Common wolf snake (Photo: Elmarie Krige)

One day, after a morning's slogging in the office, we were doing our usual walkabout in the garden after lunch and both of us simultaneously almost stepped onto a rinkhals! Luckily it was not aggressive at all (thank goodness, as it was within biting distance!), it was just lying there, probably still a bit lethargic after the winter. Eventually it went to a nearby flowerbed and then disappeared — so we now call that flowerbed the "snake flowerbed", as it is not the first time we had an encounter with a member of the snake family in that area! Well, this is close to where I feed the birds, and often mice are attracted to some of the seeds that fall out of the birdfeeders, so, no wonder - food are-aplenty for the snakes as well!



Rinkhals (Photo: Garfield Krige)

Back on the subject of birds - when I fed my dogs one morning, I noticed some birds I had not seen before in one of the acacias. They were fairly high up in the tree and I could not see them properly, so it was not easy to identify them. First just a couple perched in the tree but soon it was a whole swarm. I quickly went to fetch my camera and after downloading the photos, we identified them as Wattled Starlings (*Creatophora cinerea*).

This interesting bird is by no means scarce, but it is nomadic and does not appear regularly in the same area. Apparently it is the only African starling appearing to show affinities with the Asian starlings! Another unique fact of this bird (compared to other African Starlings), is its bare face patches and its ability to open-bill feed in grassland. Its plumage is mainly grey, except for its white rump and black flight feathers and tail. The distinctive white cross on the back is always visible when in flight.



Wattled Starling (Photo: Elmarie Krige)

During breeding season, the male has a white shoulder patch, a distinctive head pattern with unfeathered yellow skin, a black forehead and throat wattles. The extent to which these seasonal features develop, apparently increases as the bird gets older. Outside the breeding season, the male has a feathered head, except for a small yellow patch behind its eye! It also has no wattles but only a black moustache-like stripe and the white shoulder patch is also much reduced. The female and juvenile plumages are similar to the non-breeding male, but the flight feathers and tail are brown, instead of black.

The Wattled Starling is an omnivore - fruit, seeds, nectar and insects form part of its diet. But the main content of its diet consists of insects, including many locusts, resulting in the local name of "locust bird". Well, they are certainly welcome around here; the locusts can do a lot of damage to flowers and veggie patches! It also scavenges rubbish heaps and are frequently found perched on livestock, feeding on the insects disturbed by movement of the animals, as well as removing ectoparasites (such as lice and fleas) from the animal – so a really useful bird!

Have a look at some of the lovely wild flowers already in bloom – do try to spot them on your property! I wish I could add tons more photos, but that will make my letter too bulky to download.



Babiana hypogea (Photo: Elmarie Krige)



Protasparagus transvaalensis (Photo: Elmarie Krige)

Remember last month's photos of the Blacksmith Lapwing baby? Well, look how it has grown!





I am the proud father...

Baby, taken 28 September 2014



Toddler, taken on 04 September



Teenager, taken on 20 October (Hitler, eat your heart out – look at MY goosestep!)

(All 4 photos by Garfield Krige)

Time for me to say goodbye - this has been an extremely busy month and I have tons more to share with you, but not always time! But look out for the next Celtis, as there is always something interesting on our Estate I want to share with you!

Goeiedag weereens my Celtis vriende!

Na die eerste buitjie goeie reën het daar sommer vinnig bietjie groenigheid oral in die veld opgeslaan en heelwat veldblomme het kop uitgesteek.

Soos altyd na die eerste reënbuitjie was daar skielik hope duisendpote op ons pad. Wat vir my interessant is, is dat sommige die pad van links na regs kruis en ander weer andersom. Mens wonder hoekom – is dit 'n geval van die gras is groener aan die anderkant van die pad of doen hulle dit sommer net omdat hulle kan! Ongelukkig bereik nie almal hul bestemming nie – hul is nou maar eenmaal nie vinniger as 'n kar nie!

Jare gelede het ek 'n kliënt gehad wie se seun 'n reuse jaarlikse studietoelaag by 'n universiteit in die VSA gekry het om vir sy doktorale tesis navorsing te doen waarom

duisendpote in 'n sekere deel van die wêreld groter is as in 'n ander – sou dit iets met klimaatstoestande wees, of wat. Vir ons as leke klink dit half laf om vir so-iets geld te bewillig, maar natuurlik is daar meer agter die hele storie as net dit – dinge soos die impak wat die klimaat op sekere diere het en wat se invloed dit op ons het ens – dis tog deur middel van navorsing wat baie raaisels of fenomene al opgelos is. Nietemin, ek dink hy sou dalk vir mens 'n interessante verduideliking vir hierdie optrede van die duisendpote kon gee!

En nou, dames en here (trompetgeskal) hier is ons eie, splinternuwe baba (nog trompetgeskal!):

Little Wing!



Circaetus pectoralis kuiken – 1 maand oud (Foto:Elmarie Krige)

Hier is ons arendkuiken in volle glorie en ag, net 'n ma kan daardie gesig liefhê – en natuurlik ek ook - ek is dol oor die nuwe aankomeling! Met groot gesukkel het ek darem die eerste foto's kon kry. Hierdie foto is die 22e Oktober geneem toe die kuiken 'n maand oud was. Maar kyk, die kleinding is behoorlik op-en-wakker - mens dink nog jy kan nadersluip vir 'n steelfoto, dan is die koppie al weg. As iets enigsins lyk na gevaar dan is die kop weg en daar is nie 'n veertjie wat beweeg of 'n roerinkie wat aandui daar is enigsins lewe in die nes nie! Mens moet omtrent geduld hê en ek moes maar in die versengende hitte agter 'n boom langs die pad wegkruip en skielik uitspring nes ek dink die koppie bo die nes wys! Met 'n hond wat rem aan haar leiband om huis toe te gaan en die koppie wat opkom en dan weer weg is was dit omtrent 'n storie, maar ek kon darem 'n paar redelike foto's kry.

Natuurlik is Garfield toe so jaloers oor die eerste foto's van Little Wing dat hy so twee dae later met 'n stoel en lense en goeters hier wegtrek om 'n pryswennerfoto te probeer kry. Nou-ja hy het omtrent gewag! En gewag... Ek weet hoe dit voel – die foto in verlede maand se brief van Henrietta op die nes, het my langer as TWEE ure geneem om te kry! Maak nie saak hoe goed mens wegkruip, hulle oë is ontsettend skerp en hul het die vermoë om enigiets wat "anders" as hul gewone omgewing lyk, raak te sien. Ek het onder 'n digte boom tussen ruie bosgasie gestaan en wag vir die perfekte oomblik – ek het nie eers 'n stoel byderhand gehad nie. Intussen beklim die miere mens, vlieë probeer in jou oë en neus kruip en my rug en arms word gaar gekrap en gesteek deur die skerp doringagtige takke van die boom, maar mens durf nie roer nie, dan is sy weg! Wel, die gewag was darem die moeite werd, want ek het regtig 'n uitstekende foto gekry waarop ek baie trots is en ook heelwat komplimente voor gekry het!

Maar terug na Garfield en sy fotosessie. Soos genoem moes hy toe langer as 'n uur wag en uiteindelik was dit asof 'n sesde sintuig die kuiken vertel het sy ouers is in die omgewing. Die koppie het uitgekom bo die nes en hy het opgekyk in die lug en sowaar, daar kom ma en pa toe met 'n lekker slang aan! Maar met hul skerp oë het hul van doer bo gesien iets is nie reg en wou net eenvoudig nie nader kom maar het bo in die lug bly sirkel. Garfield het maar liefs opgepak en padgegee eerder as om hulle te verhoed om hul kind te kom voer. Nou-ja ek het ook gesê ons gaan nie weer naby die nes vir 'n lang ruk nie, laat hulle in rus en vrede die kleinding grootkry. Ek voel regtig baie beskermend oor "ons" arende!



Circaetus pectoralis kuiken 3 dae later (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Maar kyk net 'n bietjie hoe het die kuiken in net drie dae verander, die agterkopvere is op die foto al 'n donkerder bruin en dit lyk my die outjie groei asof sy voete in kunsmis geplant is! Met die hitte wat ons beleef het die slange natuurlik begin uitkom, so ek glo die ouers kry genoegsaam kos vir hul kuiken.



Swartborsslangarend bring 'n slang vir die kuiken (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Van slange gepraat – ons het al ons eerste somersbesoek van die slangfamilie gehad. Die eerste was van 'n wolfslangetjie wat homself in die badkamer langs die TV kamer tuisgemaak het. Soos altyd as ek en 'n slang mekaar se paaie kruis was dit net ek en die werkers tuis. Gelukkig is wolfslange darem nie giftig vir mense nie (lees meer oor hulle op die webwerf onder Fauna – Sterkfontein Snakes). Wat op aarde hy nou binne-in die huis wou maak sal net hy weet – dalk vir bietjie uitspan voor die TV – wie sal weet? Natuurlik lyk dit groter as wat dit werklik is op die foto (dis 'n nabyskoot waar die tuinjong dit met 'n graaf opgetel het) want dit was maar omtrent die dikte van my wysvinger.



Wolfslang (Foto: Elmarie Krige)

Een dag na 'n oggend se geswoeg in die kantoor stap ons in die tuin rond gedurende ons middagete blaaskans. Ons trap toe amper tegelyk op 'n rinkhals wat naby een blombedding lê en bak in die son. Die keer was dit nie aggressief nie – gelukkig tog want dit was beslis binne "byt-afstand"! Ek dink hy was nog bietjie lui na die winter. Nie lank nie, toe seil hy na 'n nabygeleë blombedding waar dit na 'n rukkie tussen die blomme verdwyn het. Ons noem nou al glads daardie area die "slangbedding" - ons het al meermale met een van die slangfamilie daar paaie gekruis. Dis te verstane, ek voer die voëls daar en veldmuise kom ook agter die saad wat uit die voerbakkies mors aan, so natuurlik is daar genoeg kos vir die slange ook!



Rinkhals (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Terug op die onderwerp van voëls – een oggend toe ek my honde kosgee sien ek voëls wat ek nog nie voorheen hier gesien het in een van die akasias kom sit. Eers net een of twee maar later sommer 'n hele swerm. Omdat hulle hoog in die boom gesit het, kon ek hulle glad nie identifiseer en het vinnig my kamera gaan haal. Gelukkig kon ek 'n paar mooi foto's kry en na ons dit afgelaai het, kon ons dit identifiseer as lelspreeus (*Creatophora cinerea*)!

Lelspreeus is 'n taamlik algemene standvoël maar kom ongereeld voor, omdat hulle nomadies van aard is. Hulle is blykbaar die enigste spreeu uit Afrika wat enigsins ooreenkomste met spreeus vanuit Asië toon. Ook is hul die enigste lid in die genus *Creatophora*. Nog 'n unieke eienskap van die voëls is die kaal kolle op hul gesigte (in vergelyking met ander spreeus uit ons kontinent) en ook die vermoë om oopbek in graslande kos te kry. Die lelspreeu is hoofsaaklik grys van kleur behalwe vir wit vere op hul rugkant en swart vlerkvere en swart sterte. Die kenmerkende wit kruis op die rug is altyd sigbaar wanneer hul in vlug is.



Lelspreeus (Foto: Elmarie Krige)

Gedurende die broeiseisoen lyk die mannetjies heelwat anders; hulle het 'n wit skouerstuk en die kop ondergaan 'n opmerklike voorkomsverandering met kaal geel gesigsvel, swart voorkop en swart lelle aan die keel. Blykbaar vergroot hierdie seisoenale voorkomsveranderings soos die voëls ouer word! Buite broeiseisoen het die mannetjie wel vere aan die kop behalwe vir 'n klein geel gedeelte agter die oë. Dit het ook nie die lelle nie, maar net 'n amperse snor-tipe swart streep en die wit skouerstuk is kleiner. Die wyfie en jong voëls se voorkoms en kleur is dieselfde as die nie-broeiende kleure van die mannetjie, maar die primêre vlerkvere en stertvere is bruin en nie swart van kleur.

Die lelspreeu is 'n omnivoor en vrugte, nektar, sade en insekte vorm deel van hul dieet. Insekte, maar veral sprinkane kry egter voorkeur. Wat my betref is hulle dan sommer baie welkom - sprinkane kan lelike skade in mens se blom- en groentetuin aanrig. Hulle word ook by vullishope aangetref en gereeld bo-op vee waar hul "saamry" om insekte wat die bewegende diere opjaag te vang. Hulle vreet ook ektoparasiete (uitwendige parasiete soos luise en vlooie byvoorbeeld) op die dier se vel – beslis 'n nuttige voëlspesie!

Hieronder, tesame met die foto's in die Engelse gedeelte, is foto's van net 'n paar van die wilde blommetjies wat nou in ons veld te siene is – kyk gerus op jul plot rond, net dalk sien julle ook van hulle raak! Hoe wens ek ek kan van elke liewe blommetjie 'n foto plaas, maar dan sal die brief te lank neem om af te laai!



Helichrysum setosum/Geel sewejaartjie (Foto: Elmarie Krige)

Dis tyd om te groet – ek het tonne goed om oor te skryf, maar soms is die tyd net te min en hierdie was so 'n dol maand. Maar kyk gerus uit vir volgende maand se Celtis - daar is altyd iets interessants wat ek graag met julle wil deel!

Terloops, kyk tog die reeks oulike foto's (in die Engelse gedeelte) wat Garfield geneem het van die bontkiewiete en kyk hoe het hulle gegroei!

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

