

## ***Celtis Africana***

Sterkfontein Country Estate November 2019

Good day all!

What a week it has been! After the lovely rains, plus our Bokke winning the Rugby World Cup, it's positive vibes all around! And then, out of the blue, I got such nice compliments about the website (and that from a complete stranger!) that it got me thinking maybe it's about time for another Celtis.

Last Wednesday I received a WhatsApp from Ilani Pretorius (SCE 178) about the sighting of a Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) in that part of the Estate and that really spurred me on to get behind my laptop and share all these interesting things with you.

It was late afternoon and the day's work just done, so for a minute or two we debated whether we should go about the schlepp of getting Garfield's camera and lenses and stuff together and driving that way or not. But then curiosity and excitement got the better of us and off we went!

Ilani's children had been driving around on their quad bikes and spotted this "huge" bird and told her about it and I think it is fantastic when children notice things about nature! So thank you very much Ilani for alerting us, it is not often one will see one of these birds so close-up!

At first it was a hassle to try and get a good photo, what with it being sunset and the sun behind the bird, plus it was not exactly going to stand still and pose for a picture! But we drove around the area where it was strutting its stuff and eventually Garfield got some really great photos!



**Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) (Photo: Garfield Krige)**



Secretary Bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) proudly strutting his stuff! (Photo: Garfield Krige)

The Secretarybird happens to be **BirdLife SA's** bird of the year (2019), so it is bragging rights to have one in our area – who knows, maybe even a breeding pair! I always thought it lives on snakes, but their main source of food is actually insects and rodents! It will take any kind of snake – even poisonous ones.

Their diet also includes bigger prey such as squirrels, mongooses and hares as well as birds (even the eggs of birds!) and all kinds of rodents. Small prey will be swallowed whole and larger prey will be killed by stamping on it accurately and then torn to pieces and eaten. It even swallows small tortoises whole!

Although it is almost exclusively a ground-dwelling bird it can fly long distances and at great heights. According to Birdlife SA, one juvenile fitted with a tracking device, flew from Northern Botswana back to its nesting site in Limpopo in one day! That is really amazing. If you click on this link to Birdlife SA's website, you'd be amazed to learn all the interesting facts about this bird. It is **absolutely** worth having a look at – it is not pages and pages of info, so don't be lazy now! There are some wonderful pictures as well.

<https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/environmental-education/bird-of-the-year-2019/>

So you think a rat is a rat? Well, not really! Recently our worker told me about a "huge rat" that seems to be around one of our fishponds, and judging from what he described, it

was at least a meter in size! But that turned out to be rather a “fisherman's tale” - you know, the big one that got away!

Late one afternoon we noticed two rather big rats nibbling away on the grass just behind the pond. Then we noticed a number of large holes all around the edge of the fishpond, which were probably entrances to the nest. Once again Garfield got very good photos.



**Angoni vlei rat (*Otomys angoniensis*)**

A friend of ours from the Walter Sisulu Botanical gardens identified it as the Angoni vlei rat (*Otomys angoniensis*). Now these cuties (yes, look at the photos, they really ARE cute!) do not come into houses at all, will not eat scraps from the kitchen but rather live on grass, reeds and other plants. Their upper side is darker and they have short tails and quite large ears. They do grow to about 30cm in length, but definitely not a meter at all! They prefer grassy swamp-like areas near rivers, but I guess with the drought, they may have decided to look for a better “suburb” where more food and water is readily available!

A couple of weeks ago, Garfield was called by our worker to catch a snake in the courtyard at his house. He knows we do not kill snakes but rather, if possible, catch and release in the veld nearby. This turned out to be a Short-snouted Grass Snake (*Psammophis brevirostris*), also known as Short-snouted Whip snake.





**Short-snouted Grass Snake (*Psammophis brevirostris*) (Cellphone Photo: Garfield Krige)**

It is apparently quite common in Gauteng and is about 60cm to 1 metre in length. This snake loves basking in the sun and is mostly active during daytime. It is very quick to flee.

Something very interesting about this snake is, if caught by the tail, it will spin around and actually bite a piece of its own tail off in order to escape! It feeds mainly on lizards, small rodents and other small snakes. Although it is quick to bite, its poison is mild and does not pose any threat to human beings.

Guys and if you don't know your rinkhals from a rubber snake, be careful out there. Should a snake bite you, remember there are emergency numbers on the website under Fauna – Reptiles and Amphibians. The photos should also help you in identifying snakes.

#### **Just for fun (and still in rugby mode!):**

There's a man sitting in the front row at the Rugby World Cup Finals, but amazingly, there's an empty seat beside him. Another man spots it, goes up to him and says: "Do you mind if I sit here?"

"No, not at all," replies the first man. "It's my wife's seat, but she died recently."

"So why didn't you get one of your family to come," asks the second man out of curiosity.

"They're all at the funeral."

I bet in 9 months' time a lot of newborn baby boys will be called Handre, Duane or Cheslin! And if it's a little girl, she might be "blessed" with names like Handreina or Duania or even Chesselina or something equally terrible!

Folks, that's all from me for now, I hope you enjoyed all the interesting things I told you about and till next time, it's all from me for now!

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Dagsê al die mense!

Wat 'n wonderlike week het ons nie gehad nie! Eers die heerlike reën, toe wen die Bokke die wêreldbeker en uit die bloute kry ek die mooiste komplimente oor die webwerf van 'n totale vreemdeling. Dis sommer toe dat ek besluit dis darem seker weer tyd vir 'n Celtis brief.

Ek kry toe ook 'n Whatsapp van Ilani Pretorius wat vertel van 'n Sekretarisvoël (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) wat naby hulle te siene is en toe besluit ek nee kyk, dis tyd! Dis mos lekker om die interessantheide van ons Estate met mekaar te deel.

Dit was laatmiddag, werkdag agter die rug en ons het gewik en weeg of ons nou Garfield se kamera en lense en goed sal gryp en daardie kant toe sal ry, maar natuurlik het nuuskierigheid en opgewondenheid die oorhand gekry en daar gaat ons!

Ilani se kroos het met hul vierwielfietse rondgery en haar toe kom vertel van die groot voël wat hul sien rondstap het. Vir my is dit altyd wonderlik as kinders dinge in die natuur raaksien. Dankie Ilani dat jy ons dadelik laat weet het, want dis sowaar nie aldag dat mens die voël van so naby kan sien nie!

Eers was dit nou 'n lolly om 'n goeie foto te probeer kry. Die laatmiddagson was reg agter die voël en verder het die ou nou nie juis gaan stilstaan en poseer vir die kamera nie. Ons moes om ry al met die area langs tot waar ons hom (of haar!) mooi van voor kon afneem waar hy met deftige hale rondstap asof die plek aan hom behoort. Maar Garfield kon uiteindelik regtig mooi foto's kry.



**Sekretarisvoël (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) (Foto: Garfield Krige)**

Toevallig is die Sekretarisvoël **BirdLife SA's** se keuse van voël van die jaar 2019, so dis nou regtig spesiaal dat ons ene (dalk nog 'n broeipaar!) hier op die Estate kon sien. Ek het nogal altyd gedink hulle leef hoofsaaklik van slange maar toe nou nie. Alhoewel hul enige slange vreet (selfs giftige slange!) is hul hoofbron van voedsel eintlik insekte en knaagdiere.



Die "landheer" op sy "landgoed"! (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Verder sluit hul dieet groter prooi soos eekhorings, meerkatte, hase en voëls (selfs voëleiers!) in. Groter prooi sal sekuur doodgetrap, verskeur en geëet word terwyl kleiner prooi sommer heel ingesluk word. Selfs klein skilpadjies word sommer heel ingesluk! Die Sekretarisvoël is hoofsaaklik 'n grondvoël, maar interessant genoeg kan hul lang ente vlieg en groot hoogtes bereik. Volgens Birdlife SA, een jongeling wat met 'n opsporingstoestel toegerus was het vanaf die noorde van Botswana gevlieg tot by die broeiplek in Limpopo – in een dag! Dis regtig ongelooflik. Hier is nou 'n skakel na Birdlife SA se webwerf en daar is lekker interessante feite sowel as mooi foto's van hierdie enigmatiese voël. Dis **regtig** die moeite werd en glo my, dis nie bladsye en bladsye nie, so doen juisself die guns en loer bietjie!

<https://www.birdlife.org.za/what-we-do/environmental-education/bird-of-the-year-2019/>

Nou as julle gedink het 'n rot is 'n rot, dink gerus weer! Onlangs vertel ons werker my van hierdie "reuse rot" wat naby een van ons tuindammetjies is en soos wat hy beskryf is die 'n meneer van 'n ding, minstens 'n meter in lengte. Maar dis toe net 'n "vissermanstorie"



– julle weet, daai grote wat altyd weggekrom het! Laterig een middag sien ons toe 2 rot gediertetjies wat agter die dammetjie “wei” op die grasperk. Daar was ook ‘n hele ry gate al om die voetstuk van die dammetjie wat ooglopend dan nou ingange na die nes moes wees. Gelukkig kon Garfield weer baie goeie foto’s kry.



**Angoni vleiroot (*Otomys angoniensis*)**

‘n Vriend van ons by die Walter Sisulu Botaniese tuin, het dit vir ons geïdentifiseer as die Angoni vleiroot (*Otomys angoniensis*). Hierdie oulike goedjies (ag man, kyk hoe oulik is hul op die foto!) is glad nie die tipe wat van huisafval lewe of in huise sal inkom nie. Hulle vreet hoofsaaklik gras, riet en ander plante. Hul bokante is donkerder as die onderkant, die stert is taamlik kort en hul het groot ore. Hulle kan tot 30cm in lengte word – maar darem nie ‘n METER nie! Hul habitat is meestal in vleiagtige areas in die gras langs riviere. Ek dink dis dalk maar met die uitgerekte droogtetoestande wat hulle besluit het hulle soek nou ‘n ander woonbuurt waar kos en water makliker bekombaar is!

So 'n rukkie gelede het ons werker Garfield kom roep omdat daar ‘n slang in die area langs sy huis is. Hy weet alte goed ons maak nie slange dood nie, en indien moontlik, vang ons hul liever en laat hul weer in die veld los. Die knaap is toe ‘n Kortsnoetgrasslang of Kortsnoetsandlang (*Psammophis brevirostris*).

Dis nou nie ‘n spesie wat ons al voorheen hier opgemerk het nie, maar dis blykbaar heel algemeen in Gauteng. Die slang kan tussen 60cm en 1 meter lank word en hou daarvan om in die son te lê en bak. Dis hoofsaaklik aktief gedurende die dag en dis ‘n haastige knaap wat somer vinnig vlug sou jy daarop afkom.



**Kortsnoetgrasslang (Psammophis brevirostris)**



"Ouma, hoekom is ouma se oë so groot?" "Sodat ek beter kan sien waar om jou te pik, my kind!"  
(Selfoonfoto's: Garfield Krige)

Maar hoor nou hier: sou jy dalk die tater aan die stert beetkry sal dit ronddraai en sowaar 'n stuk van sy eie stert afbyt net om weg te kom! Die kortsnoetgrasslang is vinnig om te byt maar die gif is nie dodelik vir mense nie. Hul leef hoofsaaklik van akkedisse, kleiner slange en knaagdiertjies.

Onthou mense, as jy nie jou pofadder van jou rubberslang kan onderskei nie, wees versigtig en sou jy dalk gehap word, op ons webwerf is telefoon nommers onder die Fauna – Reptiles and amphibians. Daar is ook goeie foto's wat jou mag help om slange uit te ken.

**Net vir die grap- en nog so in die rugbyees:**

Cyril bel vir Rassie.

Cyril: "Rassie, wat weet jy van krieket?"...



Ek dink oor nege maande gaan baie nuwe babaseuntjies Handre of Duane of dalk Faf gedoop word! En ai, behoede ons, maar sou dit nou dogtertjies wees kan sy dalk "geseën" word met vreeslikhede soos Handreina, of Duania of erger, Faffelina!

Nou-ja mense, dis al van my kant af tot 'n volgende keer. Ek hoop julle het die Celtis geniet. Mooi loop!

**Bronne/Sources:** Hugh Chittenden, Roberts Voëlgids;  
A complete guide to the snakes of Southern Africa, Johan Marais;  
Wild about Johannesburg, Duncan Butchert.  
<https://Africansnakebiteinstitute.com>

