

Celtis Africana

Sterkfontein Country Estates

February/Februarie 2014

Good day my fellow country men- and womenfolk!

February is usually a very hot month, but this year it started out being a very wet month! The rains were lovely and sorely needed, but unfortunately our road suffered somewhat. Now you know why we pay levies and why it costs so much for the upkeep of our road!

But then February is “hot” for another reason – yep, it’s that old devil, St. Valentine, who comes along once a year! Do I hear some of the men-folk sigh - seeing their budget fly out of the window? Well, the florists and restaurateurs are certainly rubbing their hands in anticipation! I think most ladies appreciate just a cuddle and genuine words of love! It is nice to receive a little gift, but if men are under pressure that they **dare not** forget, or **have to** buy all kinds of gifts, in my opinion - and I know in that of other ladies too, it certainly loses much of its spontaneity and genuineness. So don’t you girls go give them men-folk a lot of grief if they forgot about Valentine’s!

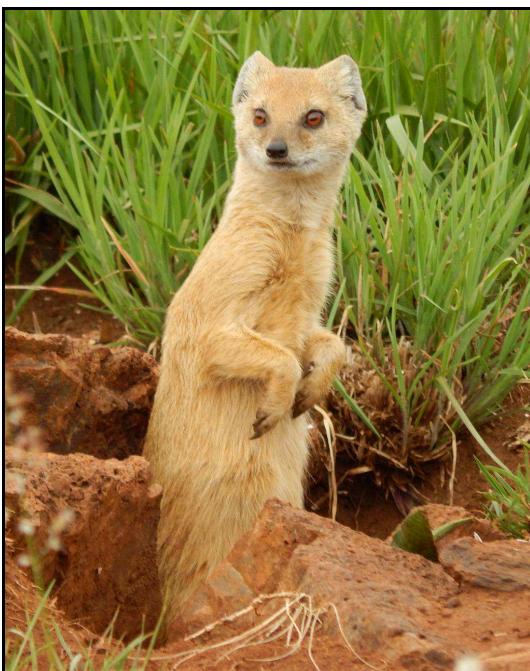
Seeing as it is all about love and flowers and pinks and reds, I am placing some photos of *Ipomoeas*, which I took during December of last year. Our plot was literally covered with the indigenous morning glory plants (*Ipomoeas*) – what a lovely sight and I literally could not stop taking photos. Two species of this plant exist on our Estate, but **please** do not confuse them with the invasive, well-known purple morning glory plant, which is a threat to our indigenous plants. Go to ‘**Invasive Plant Species**’ on the website for more information.



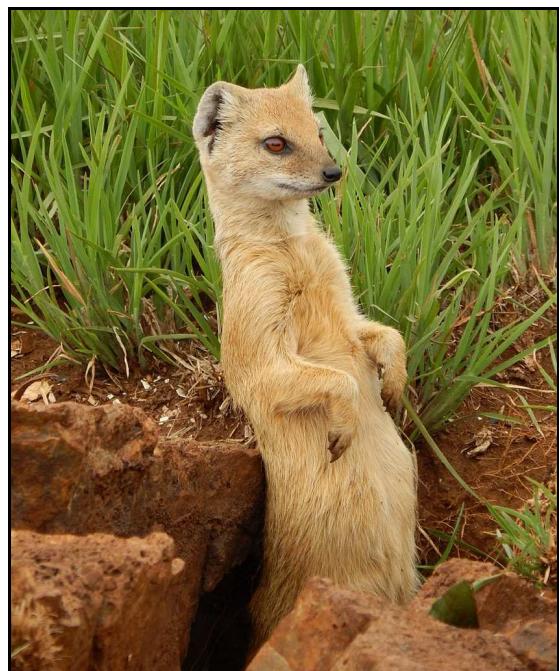
Ipomoeas



Ipomoeas



Who's that? Old St Valentine?



**Bugger that, I don't eat chocolates –
I'll rather just check out my Estate...**



"No chocolates, no flowers...? Cyril, you're sleeping alone on Valentine's night!" Barn Swallow (Europese Swael)

This month I want to write about a little animal, or rather insect, that is often heard but seldom seen. This little insect's camouflage is often so good that one can stare right at it and not see it. I am, of course, talking about the *cicada*! Often their sound is quite deafening and a sure sign of hot summer days and it's quite an interesting little fellow! The name *cicada* is a direct derivation of the Latin word, and means "tree cricket".

Cicadas are not harmful to humans as they cannot bite or sting, but can mistake an arm or other part of the body as a tree or plant limb and attempt to feed! This will, however, only happen if the cicada is allowed to rest on a person's arm for a while. Although "bites" can cause no harm, it can certainly be quite painful! There are about 150 known species in South Africa.

Cicadas reach a total length of about 2-5 cm in most species. They have prominent eyes set wide apart on the side of the head and, interestingly, also 3 small eyes, located on the top of the head between the two eyes. They have membranous front wings and short antennae protruding in front of, or between the two eyes.

The male cicada makes a loud noise with what is called 'tymbals' on the sides of the abdominal base. The interior of the male abdomen is mostly hollow, which amplifies the sound! It is a very complex method to produce the sound and it's not done in the same way that, for instance, crickets produce their sounds. The tymbals are regions on the outer skeleton of the insect that form

a complex membrane with thin, membranous portions and thickened ribs. The contracting of the internal tymbal muscles produces a clicking sound as the tymbals buckle inwards, and the relaxing of the muscles causes the tymbals to return to their original position, producing another click! Each species have its own, distinctive, "song"!

Cicadas live most of their lives (some species as long as 17 years!) underground as nymphs at a depth of between 30 cm and 2.5 m and feed on the xylem sap of roots. Cicadas have long proboscises (tubular mouthparts used for feeding and sucking) under their heads, which they insert into plant stems in order to feed.

The cicada has strong front legs for digging. In its final stage, the nymph construct an exit tunnel to the surface and emerge and shed its skin for the last time on a nearby plant and emerge as adults! This abandoned outer skeleton remains clinging to the tree or plant – have a look at our photos!

Once the female has mated, she will cut a slit (with her unique egg borer) into a soft branch or twig and deposit into this her eggs. She will continue to do so until she has laid several hundreds of eggs! Once hatched, the small nymphs will fall to the ground where they burrow and so the whole life cycle starts again. The average life cycle of cycads are between 2 and 5 years, but there are species with much longer life cycles.

Cicadas are mostly eaten by birds and sometimes squirrels, but their biggest enemy is a type of fungus disease called *Massospora cicadina*. It can be dormant underground for either cycles of 13 or 17 years, after which it becomes active. Cicadas become infected by the fungal spores carried by the nymph when they emerge from underground. The adults are rendered sterile - affected males cannot mate and affected females can mate, but cannot lay eggs.

Did you know?

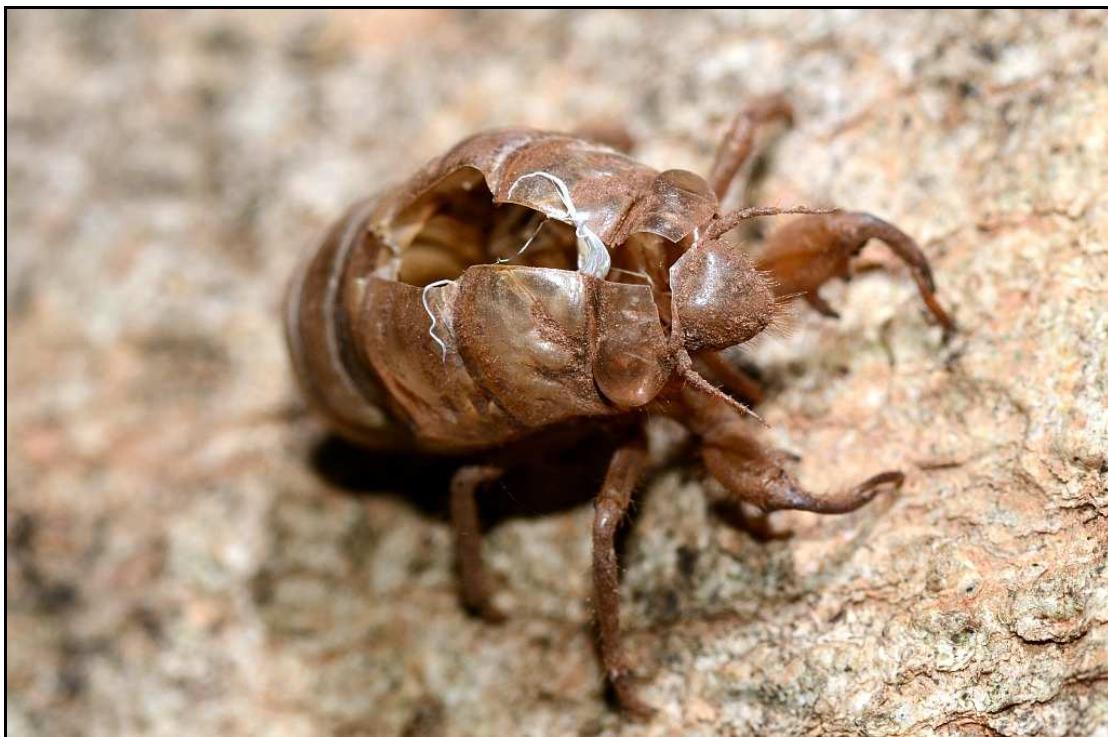
- Since the cicada emerges from the ground to "sing" every summer, in Japan it is seen as a symbol of reincarnation!
- The ancient Greeks also used a cicada sitting on a harp as emblematic of music.
- In China, the phrase "to shed off the golden cicada skin" is the poetic name of the tactic of using deception to escape danger, specifically of using decoys (leaving the old shell) to fool enemies. It became one of the "36 classic Chinese stratagems".
- In Java farmers use the cicada's sound as an indicator of the beginning of dry season (April–May). Farmers who still depend on rain irrigation will interpret this as time for planting of non-rice crops.
- Cicadas have been eaten in China, Burma, Latin America and the Congo. In North China they are skewered and deep-fried or stir-fried as a "delicacy". The Chinese also use them in so-called traditional medicine. Poor cicadas!



Cicada (sonbesie)



Note the three small eyes in the middle, between the two large eyes



After the nymph emerged as an adult, this is the remains of the skin left clinging to the tree

Late Monday (the 3rd) afternoon I noticed row upon row of, what I first thought were swallows, perched on Eskom lines across from our property. Although the light was not so good and the sky still grey and cloudy after the rains, I decided to take a walk and see if I can get better photos for our website. Because of bad light, soggy, muddy ground and pools of water, I could not get too close and as soon as I did get a bit closer, most of them would take off. So it really was a case of pressing the button and hoping for something useable. However, I noticed those who took off flew in quite a different way than what swallows do, so I knew it could not be swallows.

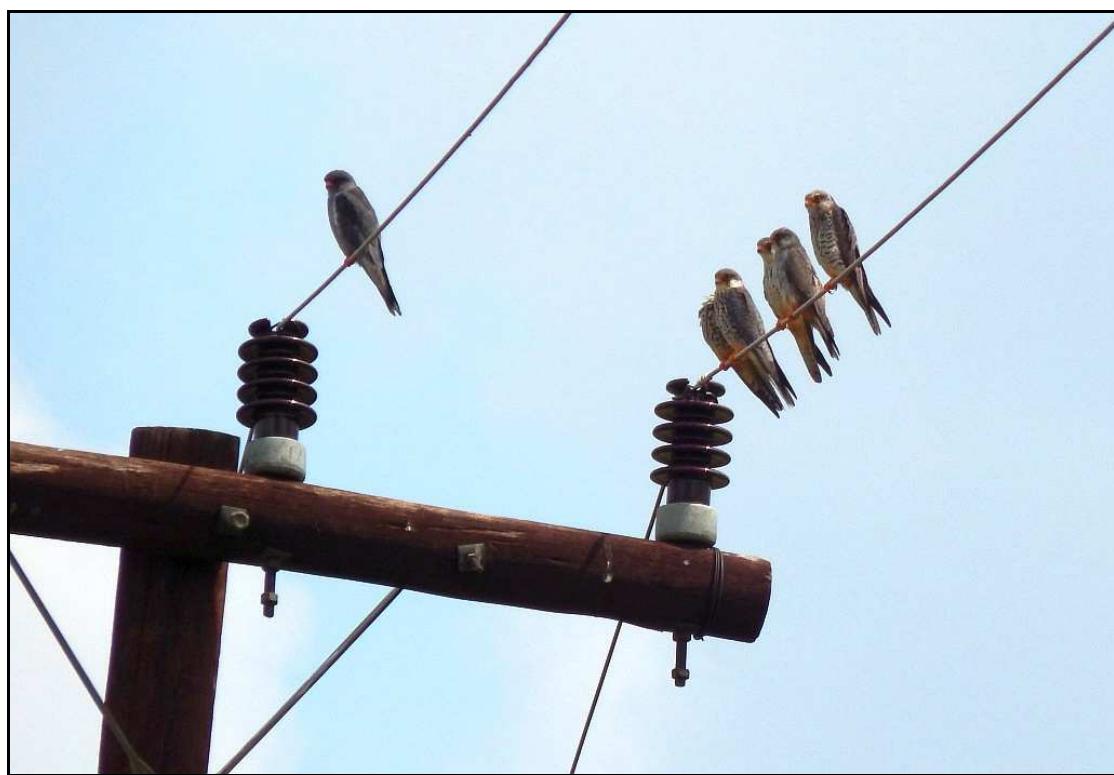
Once home, we downloaded the photos and although not fantastic, we could see these were little falcons and at first thought they were Eurasian Hobbies (*Falco subbuteo*) due to the colouring. However, I noticed some birds did not have the "stripes" and were a monotone dark grey and wondered if these might be the young, but I could not find anything on the Internet about the young being that different.

The next morning, having e-mailed some of the photos to my daughter, a keen bird photographer, she and a colleague identified them as Amur Falcons (*Falco amurensis*). These two species (Eurasian Hobbies and the Amur Falcon) are often confused because of the similarities in colouring. However, on closer inspection, it is clear the Amur Falcon's legs are a brighter red in colour and the males are plain charcoal grey without the "stripes" of the female. The males and females of the Eurasian Hobby have the same colouring and the "stripes" are horizontal whilst the Amur Falcon's "stripes" are in a vertical fashion. Also the Amur Falcon tends to move around in big

swarms, whereas the Hobby is more of a loner and will only sometimes fly in small groups.

What is interesting about this lovely bird is that it is a non-breeding, migratory bird. It travels enormous distances from South-East Siberia, Northern China etc where they breed, to Southern Africa to spend the Northern winter months in the warmer, Eastern parts of our Country, and are here from about November to May. Locally they tend to move around to areas wherever rain has fallen and insects appear. They love grasshoppers and flying termites, occasionally taking a small bird. They feed mainly late afternoon or early in the morning, although after the heavy rains of late, I have seen them feed earlier in the afternoons as well. They probably saw the "larder" is open and decided to go for it!

They tend to congregate in their thousands in overnight roosting places and, in fact, I took photos of some taking their perch for the night in some of the trees around the area. Today, once again I tried to get better photographs, but they are so flighty, so although not the very best of pictures, have a look at these lovely birds. Hopefully they won't be moving out of area soon in search of a better-stocked "restaurant"! So, although they might be around for a short while, it is great to see them proudly sitting on the Eskom wires, grooming themselves and elegantly taking to the skies every few minutes in search of insects. Hopefully they will be regular visitors to our Estate!



Amur Falcons on the Eskom line



Female Amur Falcon



Amur Falcons waiting for prey...

On a lighter note: What is the best part of Valentine's Day? The next day when all the chocolates go on sale!
What did the French chef give his girlfriend for Valentine's Day? A hug and a quiche!

Dagsê my mede-landelikes!

Hoewel Februarie bekend is as een van die warmste maande het dit die jaar as 'n baie nat maand begin! Ongelukkig het ons pad weer daar onder gely en ek dink mense verstaan hoekom ons almal moet bydra om die pad in stand te hou!

Februarie is natuurlik "warm" vir 'n ander rede ook – ja, dis natuurlik die maand wat ou Valentyn sommige se sakke bietjie liger maak! Ek hoor al hoe sug die manne as hul "sien" hoe vlieg die rande en sente uit hulle sakke, reguit in die bloemiste en restauranteienaars se kasregisters in! Maar wat, ek glo die meeste dames waardeer 'n lekker druk en 'n paar opregte liefdeswoordjies in die ore op die regte tyd net so baie! Die oomblik wat iets geforseerd is dan verloor dit die egtheid van die daad, so dames, moet nou nie die arme manne buite saam met die honde laat slaap as hul vergeet het om jou op die 14^{de} te bederf nie! Koop self maar die wyn en sjokolade, stuur die kinders vroeg bed toe en geniet 'n lekker aand saam met manlief!

Siende dat Februarie oor die liefde en blomme en pienk en rooi gaan, het ek 'n paar mooi foto's uitgesoek van ons inheemse morning glory wat ek in Desember geneem het. Ons plot was op plekke letterlik oortrek met die rankers vol pragtige pienk blomme. Moet asseblief nie verwarring met die indringer morning glory wat 'n groot pes is en maklik oorneem – kyk gerus weer op ons webtuiste onder "**Invasive Plant Species**" vir meer inligting.

'n Interessante diertjie, of meer spesifiek 'n insek wat baie gehoor word, maar min gesien word, is die sonbesie. 'n Mooier en meer beskrywende naam, is boomsingertjie! Hierdie insek is soms so goed gekamoefleer dat mens daarna kan vasstaar en dit eenvoudig nie raaksien nie. Die naam "cicada" is direk uit die Latyns en beteken "tree cricket", om nou die Engels aan te haal.

Die sonbesie kan nie regtig byt nie en het nie 'n angel nie, so dit hou nie gevaar vir mense in nie. Sou iemand - soos bv 'n seuntjie wat hou van goggas en goete een egter 'n ruk lank op sy arm hou, (soos seuntjies mos maar maak – o, en sommige dapper dogtertjies ook!) sal die insek wel probeer om met sy proboskus deur die vel te gaan opsoek na sap en dit kan baie pynlik wees! Daar kom 150 spesies boomsingertjies in Suid Afrika voor.

Meeste sonbesies bereik 'n gemiddelde lengte van tussen 2 en 5 cm, hoewel daar wel groter tipes bestaan. Hulle het twee groot, prominente oë aan die kant van die kop, en, interessant genoeg, ook 3 klein ogies bo-op die kop (in die middel van die voorkop) tussen die groot oë. Hul voorste vlerke is vliesagtig en hulle het kort antennas geleë voor, of tussen die oë.

Die mannetjies is die raasbekke. Hoe die geluid voortgebring word is kortlik as volg: Ons kan sê die geluidsorgaan (soos 'n timbaal wat 'n slaginstrument is) lê op die eerste agterlyfsegment van die sonbesie, met 'n styf gespande trommelvlies wat deur sterk spiere vinnig in- en uitbeweeg word en die geluid

voortbring. Die agterlyf is grotendeels met lug gevul, wat die klank soos 'n trom versterk. Elke spesie het ook 'n eie unieke "lied"!

Die sonbesie leef die grootste deel van hul lewe (sommige spesies tot 17 jaar!) ondergronds (op 'n diepte van tussen 30 cm en 2.5 m) as nimfe. In die finale nimf-fase sal hul met hul sterk voorpote 'n tonnel na buite grawe, vervel en as volwasse sonbesies verskyn! Die vel bly agter aan die boom of plant – kyk na ons foto's. Hulle leef van plantsappe en beskik oor 'n lang proboskus (buisvormige mondgedeelte wat gebruik word om te suig) wat onder die kop geleë is, en waarmee hul letterlik in 'n plant inboor om die sap by te kom.

Nadat die wyfie gepaar het, sal sy met haar spesiale eierboor in 'n tak of plant inboor om 'n paar eiers te lê. Sy sal so voortgaan totdat 'n paar honderd eiers gelê is. Sodra die eiers uitbroei, val die klein, sespotige nimfie grond toe en grawe 'n tonnel ondergronds om daar te gaan lewe en so begin die hele lewensiklus van voor af! Die lewensiklus is tussen 2 en 5 jaar (met sekere uitsonderings van tot 17 jaar) maar die volwasse fase wat ons ore so laat tuit, is maar baie kortstondig!

Sonbesies word meestal deur voëls, en soms eekhorinkies geëet. Hul grootste vyand is egter 'n swamsiekte genaamd *Massospora cicadina*. Hierdie spore leef in sikkusse van 13 en 17 jaar en word na buite gedra deur die nimfe. Beide mannetjies en wyfies word geaffekteer en word steriel. Geaffekteerde mannetjies kan nie paar nie en die geaffekteerde wyfies kan wel paar, maar kan nie eiers lê nie.

Het jy geweet?

- Die Japanese sien die sonbesie as 'n simbool van reïnkarnasie omdat dit van onder uit die grond uitkom om te kom "sing".
- In antieke Griekeland is 'n voorbeeld van 'n sonbesie op 'n harp geplaas om musicaliteit voor te stel.
- In China is daar 'n uitdrukking wat verwys na die vervelling van die sonbesie en dat dit verteenwoordigend is van die manier waarop teenstanders in gevaarsituasies mislei word. Die dop/vel word as lokmiddel gelos terwyl die ware Jakob érens anders is! Dit het een van die "36 classic Chinese stratagems" in gevegskuns geword.
- In Java word die sonbesie se geluid gebruik as aanduiding dat die droë seisoen aangebreek het (April- Mei) en boere wat volgens reënseisoene plant, sal dus nie rysgewasse aanplant.
- Sonbesies word geëet in lande soos China, Burma, Latyns- Amerika en die Kongo. In die noorde van China word hul ingeryg soos sosaties en gediepbraai of as lekkerny geroerbraai. Die Chinese gebruik hulle ook in hul sogenaamde tradisionele medisyne. Arme ou boomsingertjies!

Ek kon nie help om hierdie lakoniese (tong-in-die-kies, dames!) aanhaling van die ou Griek, Xenarchus te plaas nie: "Gelukkig is die lot van sikades want hulle almal het sprakeloze gades"!

Van iets anders gepraat – laat Maandagmiddag (3^{de} Feb) het ek letterlik honderde “swaeltjies” op die Eskomlyne gesien sit en besluit om nader te stap in die hoop dat ek beter foto's vir ons webtuiste kan neem. Die lig was egter swak en natuurlik, sodra mens naderkom, vlieg hulle weg. Dit was dus 'n geval van mik-en-druk in die hoop om iets bruikbaars te kan kry. Natuurlik het die modder en plasse water oral my taak glad nie makliker gemaak nie! Ek kon egter sien aan die manier wat hulle vlieg dat die swaeltjies kon wees nie.

Nadat ons die foto's afgelaai het, het ons eers gedink weens die “strepe” op die lyf, dat dit Europese boomvalkies (*Falco subbuteo*) is, maar omdat van hulle 'n eenkleurige donkergris voorkoms gehad het, was ek nie so seker nie. 'n Vinnige soek op die Internet het ook nie inligting opgelewer dat dit dalk die jong voëls is wat effekleurig is nie.

Die volgende dag het ek 'n paar foto's na my dogter per e-pos gestuur aangesien sy baie belangstel in die fotografie van voëls. Sy het saam met 'n kollega gou uitgewys dat dit in werklikheid Oostelike Rooipootvalkies (*Falco amurensis*) is! Die twee spesies word gereeld verwarring oordat die kleure so na aan mekaar is. Maar, as mens mooi kyk, sal mens oplet die Oostelike Rooipootvalkies het, soos hul naam aandui, helder rooi bene en pote, die mannetjies is die donkergris, meer eenkleurige voëls, en die “strepies” op die wyfies is horisontaal terwyl dit op die Europese boomvalkie vertikaal voorkom. Die mannetjies en wyfies van die Europese boomvalkies lyk ook dieselfde. Ook kom die Oostelike Rooipootvalke in groot swerms voor, terwyl die Europese boomvalkie meer alleenlopend is en soms in klein groepies sal saamswerm.

Hierdie nie-broeiende Palearktiese trekvoël reis enorme afstande vanaf Suidoos Siberië, Noordelike China ens., waar hul broei. So ontsnap hul die ysige noordelike winters om die somer in warmer Suidelike Afrika deur te bring. Hulle kom veral in die Oostelike gedeeltes van ons land en vanaf November tot Mei voor. Die Oostelike Rooipootvalkies is hoogs swermvormend en trek plaaslik rond waar reëns geval het en insekte uitkom. Hulle vreet graag sprinkane, vlieënde termiete en soms klein voëltjies. Hul jag gewoonlik vroegoggens of laat in die middag, maar na die baie reën die afgelope tyd, weet hulle die “spens” is oop en het ek hul wel vroeër in die middag ook opgemerk waar hul besig was om insekte te vang!

Hulle sal vroegaand letterlik in hul honderde op bome toesak waar hul die nag sal deurbring en ek het foto's geneem waar sommige reeds hul plekkie vir die nag in bome ingeneem het. Hoewel ek vandag weer probeer het om foto's te neem, is hulle so blitsig om weg te vlieg, so hierbo is foto's wat ek wel kon kry. Dis pragtige voëls en dis te lekker om te sien hoe trots hulle rondsit op die Eskom drade, hul vere kam en regskut en elke nou en dan grasieus opstyg om blitsnel 'n paar goggas in die lug te vang! Ek hoop nie hulle verruil vinnig ons Estate vir 'n area waar die “restaurante” meer op die spyskaart het nie en hopelik sal ons hulle volgende somer weer hier rond sien!

Tot volgende maand, Sterkfonteingroete!

