

Celtis africana

Sterkfontein Country Estates

May/Mei 2014

Good day *Celtis* friends!

***"O, the month of May, the merry month of May,
So frolic, so gay, and so green, so green, so green!"***

- To quote from the poem by the Elizabethan writer and poet Thomas Dekker, (c. 1572 – 25 August 1632) and although here in the southern hemisphere it is autumn, the days are so bright and sunny and there are still lots of green all over, that he might as well have referred to South Africa! This is the best time of the year for me, mornings and evenings are chilly, but for the most parts the days are warm and the sky often takes on that wonderful intense blue we only get at this time of the year.

Most of the veld looks void of any colour, but on closer inspection, spots of purple amongst the tall grasses reveal *Vernonia poskeana*. The lower growing *Helichrysum krausii* with its grey foliage are also showing off their heads of bright yellow flowers. For the bright red *Striga asiatica* (Witchweed) and *Striga elegans* (Large Witchweed) one has to be very observant, as the flowers are really quite small. But take a walk on your plot and discover and get to know our wild flowers! The *Aloe greatheadii* var. *davyana*, which are plentiful on our Estate, is a drab and uninteresting plant, but when it flowers in winter, it is rather spectacular. Soon it will pop up the pinkish red flowers, setting our veld alight with colour.



Vernonia poskeana



Vernonia poskeana



Helichrysum krausii



Striga elegans



Striga asiatica

So you thought animals don't communicate? I disagree! Often Ryan Jeffery (SCE133) lets his cattle graze on the empty plot (SCE130) in front of us. When I take my early morning walk with my dogs, some of the calves come cantering up to the fence, sticking their noses through the fence sniffing my one dog, Shiloh, a Labrador/Alsatian cross. He replies by giving their noses a good lick and I have taken the cutest videos of some of the older ones giving him a lick right back. Unfortunately it is too big a file to include in the letter. It's funny that they do not care for any of the other dogs! Maybe they think he is just another calf! Lately he starts running the moment we get closer to the fence - as if he can't wait to give his friends their good morning kiss! See photos in the Afrikaans section.

Has anyone perhaps lost some relatives? Well, they are alive and well and living in the high *Celtis africana* (White Stinkwood) trees at the Estate's entrance, on plot 145! I took some photos of the vervet monkeys (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*) when I went for a long walk on our road, and boy, do they sometimes give me a performance! They do make one laugh with their antics. We never had any monkeys until a couple of years ago – I guess it got overcrowded at Kromdraai and some families decided to migrate this way. Obviously they feel there are enough food and a safe place to stay and decided to make this their new home. They are cute but can sometimes become a problem when their numbers increase too much – let's hope they stay down there and do not decide to move up Malmani road, we might then encounter problems with them.



Vervet Monkeys / Blouape

I got an e-mail about hedgehogs and am including this link (<http://ifoundahedgehog.wix.com/hedgehogs>) if you have encountered any, kindly contact these people (Ifah Project). We found one once, years ago, next to our driveway. One of my dogs curiously picked it up, but after shouting from me, quickly dropped it and I was very worried it may have been injured. I kept it for a couple of days in an old birdcage and put down some water and fruit, not really knowing how to care for it. The first couple of days it just moved around a bit, but its eyes were bright and shiny and it actually looked fine. When I saw on the third day it drank some water and nibbled on the fruit, I knew it was time to say goodbye and we took it back to where it was found, watching it happily disappear into the grass. Unfortunately some people admitted to having put down rat poison and have found a dead hedgehog as a result. Please be mindful – there are many other environmentally friendly ways to keep rodent populations down. These little animals are so vulnerable, let us human beings not add to their demise.

I remember the first time I saw elephant shrews (*Macroscelididae*). We had a piece of black plastic pipe left near one of our taps in the veld, so we could just hold the one side to the tap to water some trees close by, instead of dragging a hosepipe all the way from the garden. One winter morning I wanted to water some trees, so I held the pipe to the tap, opened and after the first gush of water out popped a whole bundle of these little animals! I don't know who was more surprised – them or me! Unbeknownst to me, they used the pipe for a warm, dry sleeping place. For a few seconds they looked quite bedraggled and I could see clearly what they looked like. However, they quickly recovered and disappeared into the undergrowth at great speed!

These little mammals have a rodent-like appearance but are not rodents at all. The name “elephant shrew” is also a total misnomer, as they are neither

elephant nor shrew, but are more closely related to elephants than to shrews! Yes, don't judge a book by its cover – or should I say an elephant shrew by its size! It might be diminutive compared to an elephant, yet the biologists obviously found family lines for it to be related to elephants. They are sometimes called hopping shrews because of the way they can hop like rabbits with their long hind legs. The elongated nose reminds one of an elephant's trunk and it uses it much the same way to sniff out prey and can move it around cleverly just like an elephant moves its trunk! They are found exclusively in Africa and there are 20 known species and their colour and the length of the nose varies from specie to specie. A more appropriate name suggested by some biologists is 'sengi' - from an African language.

Elephant shrews are insectivorous and live on invertebrates such as spiders, insects, centipedes, millipedes and earthworms and use it's nose to sniff them out and uses it's tongue to flick food into their mouths – much like an anteater! Some elephant shrews also feed on small amounts of plant matter when available, especially new leaves, seeds, and small fruits.

They are mostly active during the day but are seldom seen. Elephant shrews are very wary and well camouflaged animals and are able to run away from danger extremely quickly. They make pathways in the undergrowth, patrolling it throughout the day for food; it also provides a clear getaway for them when in danger.

Another interesting fact of these mammals is that a female elephant shrew undergoes a menstrual cycle, similar to that of human females! After a mating period of several days, they return to their solitary habits – they are not very social and only get together for the sole purpose of mating. After the gestation period of between 45- 60 days, the female will give birth to a litter of between one and three young, several times a year. The young are well developed and can move around independently a few hours after birth. However they stay in the nest at first. After five days, the young's milk diet is supplemented with mashed insects, which are collected and transported in the cheek pouches of the female! After a couple of days the young will venture out in search of food and after about 15 days will begin the migratory period of their lives. This lessens the dependency on the mother.

Of course I am not lucky enough to have taken photos of these cute mammals. I do not like to place any photos of animals or plants that was NOT taken on the Estate itself. But if you really want to see one in action and what they look like, do go to this amazing video on <http://vimeo.com/10310168> - I can't remember when last I saw such a fantastic video. Imagine the cameras that must have been set up to get this footage, the patience and then the editing! Absolutely worth watching!

Our eagles are doing well and seem to have chosen a spot for the nest. I was lucky enough on one of my morning walks on Malmani road to see them using branches picked off one tree, taking it to the tree where they decided to build the nest. Luckily I had my camera at hand, so have a look at the photos! I have seen it sit on the nest or in its vicinity several times. At other times the

male was sitting next to the nest, whilst the female was trampling down on nesting material, turning around and obviously rearranging nesting matter to make it more comfortable. I think they might still be “test-driving” the nest before settling down, laying an egg (who knows – maybe a couple of them!) and start to breed seriously. I think it is a bit early, considering the gestation period - the chick might hatch in winter when food is a bit scarce. However, having lived on our Estate for the past couple of years, maybe it is confident in knowing the food supply will actually be enough! See photos in the Afrikaans section.

A beautiful quote for this time of the year:

“Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.”
— Albert Camus (7 November 1913 – 4 January 1960) was a French Nobel Prize winning author, journalist, and philosopher.

From me, for now, it is time to say goodbye – I hope you enjoyed my rather long letter! It is wonderful when I encounter somebody from the Estate who still does not know it is me who do the letter and then tell me how much they enjoy reading it. Makes the research and ideas absolutely worthwhile!

Goeie dag weereens my *Celtis* vriende!

**“Bloedrooi die aalwyn langs
die slingerpad.
Dis of daar vonke uit
elke vuurpyl spat.”**

-Om aan te haal uit die gedig “Plaashek” deur Uys Krige (Suid Afrikaanse skrywer van kortverhale, stories, gedigte en dramas in Afrikaans sowel as in Engels - 4 Februarie 1910 – 10 Augustus 1987) - wat my altyd herinner aan hierdie tyd van die jaar op ons Estate wanneer die aalwyne stadig maar seker begin knopmaak.

Dis my gunsteling tyd van die jaar – die oggende is koel en laatmiddag het ook ‘n byt in die lug, maar die dae is oor die algemeen oop en sonnig met die lug die intense blou wat so kenmerkend is van die tyd van die jaar. Daar is nog groenigheid orals te siene – die veld het nog nie regtig die val wintersbaadjie aangetrek nie.

Mens is ook geneig om te dink daar is geen kleur meer oor in die veld nie, maar as mens mooi tussen die lang grasse kyk sal mens nog plek-plek die helder pers blommetjies van die *Vernonia poskeana* tussendeur sien. Die laergroeiende *Helichrysum krausii* met hul grys blare en stamme se heldergeel blomkoppies wys ook nog oral. Om die helderrooi blommetjies van die *Striga asiatica* (Rooiblom) en die *Striga elegans* (Grootrooiblom) raak te sien moet mens nogal fyn kyk tussen die gras – die plant se blommetjies is besonder klein. Maar stap bietjie in die veld op jou plot rond – dis tog lekker

om ons eie inheemse plante en blomme te leer ken! Foto's in die Engelse afdeling.

Ons eie *Aloe greatheadii* var. *davyana* is nie regtig iets om oor huis toe te skryf maar as die wintervaal toesak op ons Estate en hulle is in volle blom dan is hul pienk-rooi tog pragtigevlamme van kleur wat ons veld ophelder!

Ek weet van julle dink ek is laf as ek sê diere kommunikeer, maar ek dink tog hulle doen – op hul eie unieke maniere! Ryan Jeffery (SCE133) laat soms sy beeste op die leë plot (SCE130) hier voor ons wei. Soggens as ek met my honde op die plot stap kom van die kalwers nader gedraf. Ewe nuuskierig steek hul dan hul snoete deur die draad en kry 'n lekker paar lekke van Shiloh ons groot swart Labrador/ Alsatian kruising. Van die oueres het ook al nadergekom en op hul beurt hom 'n paar lang lekke teruggegee. Hulle is glad nie geïnteresseerd in enige van my ander honde nie, maar dalk dink hulle ou Shiloh is ook maar 'n kalfie. Ek het die oulikste video's geneem van die oggendkuiertjies – ongelukkig is dit te groot om hier in te sluit. Die laaste ruk het hy selfs begin draf sodra ons nader aan die weiplek kom – kompleet asof hy nie kan wag vir sy vroegmôre soengroet nie!



Goeiemôre!!!

Is daar dalk iemand wat op soek is na langverlore familie? Wel, ek het hulle gevind! Hulle is op en wakker en aan die gang in die hoë *Celtis africana*

(witstinkhout) bome by die ingang op plot SCE 145. Ek het 'n paar foto's van die blouapies geneem as ek op een van my vele Malmani weg oggendstappies is. Die oomblik wat hulle my sien begin hulle natuurlik allerhande aapstreke uithaal en kan ek nie help om te lag nie. Hulle is maar die natuur se narre! Ons het nooit ape daar gehad nie, maar die afgelope paar jaar is hulle wel hier rond. Ek dink dit het bietjie oorbevolk geraak in Kromdraai en het 'n groepie besluit hier is genoegsaam kos en skuilplek en toe hier kom intrek. Solank hulle net daar bly en nie verder op in Malmani beweeg nie, is alles reg – hulle kan ongelukkig soms probleme veroorsaak vir mense en troeteldiere. Foto's in Engelse afdeling.

Ek het 'n e-pos ontvang oor krimpvarkies en as julle dalk van hulle opmerk, laat gerus die mense (Ifah Project) weet in die skakel (<http://ifoundahedgehog.wix.com/hedgehogs>). Jare gelede was daar enetjie langs ons oprit en my een hond tel dit toe op, maar na 'n woeste geskreeu van my kant laat val hy die ou dingetjie toe. Ek was bekommerd dat die diertjie seergekry het en het hom of haar toe in 'n ou voëlkoutjie gesit om dop te hou vir beserings. Maar wat, die blink ogies het my vertel alles is reg en na so paar dae se rond beweeg het hy of sy begin knibbel aan die vrugte wat ek daar gesit het en van die water gedrink en toe weet ek, dis tyd om te groet. Ons het hom (of haar) op dieselfde plek gaan neersit waar ons dit gekry het en gekyk hoe die diertjie ewe gelukkig in die lang gras wegbeweeg.

Ongelukkig is daar mense wat erken het dat, nadat hul rotgif uitgesit het, hulle 'n dooie krimpvarkie daar naby opgetel het. Daar is tog ander, beter, omgewingsvriendelike maniere om van ongewenste knaagdiere ontslae te raak, laat ons tog versigtig wees met gryp na gif vir 'n oplossing. Die oulike diertjies het alreeds 'n stryd op oorlewing met vele vyande, laat ons mense nie ook nog bydra tot hul stryd nie.

Die klaasneus (*Macroscelididae*) is 'n baie oulike klein soogdiertjie wat hier voorkom. Die naam is grappig en sê eintlik niets van die diertjie self nie. Klaasneuse laat mens half aan muise met hul lang sterte en algemene voorkoms dink, maar is glad nie familie van muise en is hoofsaaklik insekvretend. Die Engelse naam is nog **meer** verwarrend omdat hulle nie "shrews" is en nog minder olifante – hoewel hul tog nader verwant is aan olifante as aan "shrews"!

Klaasneuse het groot ogies en ore en hul snoet is verleng wat mens baie aan die slurp van 'n olifant dink. Hulle kan die "slurpie" net so slim en oulik rondbeweeg om kos uit te ruik as wat 'n olifant met sy slurp kan doen. Die "slurpie" snuif prooi uit en met die tong word die kos in die mond ingeskiet – baie soos 'n miervreter! Klaasneuse lewe van insekte, spinnekoppe, honderdpote, duisendpote en erdwurms. Sekere klaasneuse eet wel ook plantmateriaal soos veral nuwe blaartjies, sade en klein vruggies.

Hulle is hoofsaaklik bedags bedrywig maar dis min wat mens hulle sien. Hulle is so beweeglik en het oral tonnels in die gras wat hulle goed gebruik om vyande te ontglip. Die tonnels word heeldag gepatrolleer op soek na kos.

Die eerste keer toe ek van hulle teëgekom het was toe ek van ons bome in die veld wou natmaak. Dit was winter en in plaas van elke keer die tuinslang nader te sleep, het ons 'n ou swart rubberpyp by een van ons krane in die veld gelos om makliker water by die bome te kry. Een wintersoggend wou ek gou bome natmaak en sonder dat ek weet, het van die diertjies hul intrek in die pyp gemaak. Dit was natuurlik 'n gerieflik skuilplek - bak heelik warm bedags en bly heelik droog. Na die eerste straal water spoel daar toe sommer so bondel van die diertjies uit – ek weet nie wie was die meeste verbaas – ek of hulle! Vir 'n oomblik was hulle heel bedremmeld maar soos in blitsig is hulle woerts en weg in die gras.

Die diertjie is eie aan Afrika en daar is ongeveer 20 verskillende spesies. Hulle kom in verskillende kleure voor en die lengte van die snoet varieer ook in die verskillende spesies. Met hul sterk en verlengde agterbene kan hul vinnig rondhop en dit laat mens weer aan 'n springhaas dink! Bioloe voel 'n beter benaming vir die diertjies is "sengi" wat sy oorsprong in 'n Afrika taal het.

Wat nou baie interessant van die klaasneuse is, is dat die wyfies 'n menstruele siklus het soortgelyk aan die menslike spesie! Na 'n paringsperiode van 'n paar dae sal die mannetjie en wyfie terugkeer na hul enkellopende maniere – hulle is wel getrou aan een maat maar is nie huis sosiaal en kom slegs bymekaar vir paringsdoeleindes. Na die dragtigheidsperiode van tussen 45-60 dae, sal die wyfie geboorte skenk aan 'n werpsel van een en drie kleintjies, paar maal per jaar. Die kleintjies is heel goed ontwikkeld en kan binne 'n paar uur na geboorte onafhanklik rondbeweeg. Hulle bly egter eers in die nes. Na vyf dae word hul melkdieet aangevul deur fyngekoude insekte wat die ma in haar kieste aandra! 'n Paar dae later sal die kleintjies uit die nes begin kom en rondsoek vir kos en na 15 dae sal die migrerende periode van hul lewe begin. Dit verminder die afhanklikheid van die kleintjies aan die ma.

Natuurlik was ek nog nie gelukkig genoeg om 'n foto van die vinnige klein diertjies te kon neem nie, ek plaas mos nie graag foto's van diere of plante wat nie op die Estate self geneem is nie. As julle nou regtig wil sien hoe oulik en rats hierdie diertjies is, kyk gerus op <http://vimeo.com/10310168> - dis een van die oulikste video's wat ek in 'n lang tyd gesien het! Dink aan al die geduld en hope kameras wat gebruik is om dit te verkry - absolutuut die moeite werd om te kyk!

Ons arende blyk heel gelukkig te wees op die Estate en het 'n plek vir hul nuwe nes uitgesoek. Ek was gelukkig genoeg om op een van my oggendstappies op Malmani hul te kon afneem waar hul takkies aandra na die nes – gelukkig het ek my kamera daardie keer byderhand gehad! Ek sien hul ook gereeld op die nes of in die omgewing daarvan op bome rondsit. 'n Ander keer het die mannetjie langsaan gesit terwyl die wyfie die nesmateriaal mooi plattrap en dit gemaklik maak. Ek dink hulle "toetsbestuur" dalk nog eers die nes voordat hulle in alle erns begin broei! Ek dink dis dalk bietjie vroeg om nou die eiers te lê, want die kleintjies sal dan in die winter uitbroei wanneer

kos taamlik skaars is. Aan die anderkant, siende hul al 'n paar jaar hier broei is hul dalk seker genoeg van die omgewing en beskikbaarheid van kos.







Nou-ja, dis 'n lang, en ek glo, interessante brief en ek hoop julle het dit geniet. Dis vir my baie lekker as ek nou nog mense langs die pad teëkom wat nie geweet het dis ek wat die brief doen nie en my vertel hoe hulle dit geniet om dit te lees – dan weet ek dis elke stukkie oplees en navorsing werd!

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

