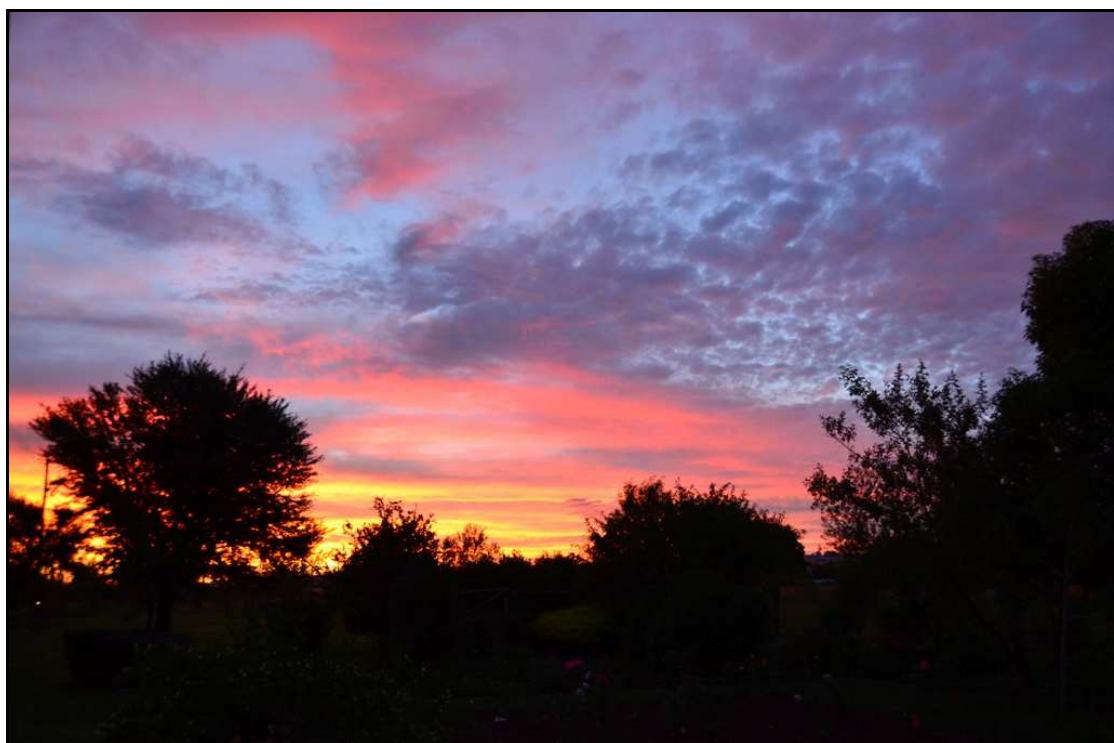


Celtis africana

Sterkfontein Country Estates May/Mei 2015

Good day to all the Celtis friends!

I do love this time of the year on our Estate – this is when the skies are the most wonderful “Highveld blue” during the day and the sunsets we witness out here are something fantastic. The colours are impossible hues of oranges, pinks, mauves and reds - it almost looks artificial. We love to, when we have a chance, sit on the balcony watching the sun go down; birds taking a last quick worm on their way home for the night and the peace and quiet we are so blessed to have out here. This is the absolute best time of the day to be outside!



We have noticed before that, when we have had a very dry summer, red ants (or also called fire ants) move into our lawn – probably in search of food. This results in the poor earthworms being attacked and suddenly we have lots of earthworms appearing above ground on the lawn, trying to escape these predators. Of course this is a feast for the Lapwings and the Thick-Knees. The Blacksmith lapwing, even though the smallest of this lot, is also the cheekiest and while watching TV, we witness all their antics. They'd have all kinds of territorial fights with the other lapwings and the Thick-knees; the Thick-knees would spread their wings in an attempt to look more intimidating, but Mr Blacksmith won't budge an inch, the lawn “belongs” to him and he would defend his open-air restaurant to the last feather!

On Good Friday evening, we were watching TV as usual - our windows and curtains always wide open so we can watch whatever is happening outside, when all of a

sudden one of the Blacksmiths started screeching hysterically right in front of our window. At first we ignored it, but eventually I said to Garfield what the heck is going on, this bird is screeching its head off and would look at us through the window as if to ask for help.

And lo and behold what a surprise visitor we had! On our sundial, not even seven metres from our open window, sat a beautiful Spotted Eagle Owl (*Bubo africanus*)! This despite the comings and goings of our dogs, us having the TV on and moving about inside - it seemed quite at ease! Every now and then it would hop down onto the lawn, feasting on this eat-as-much-as-you-like meal of earthworms to the horror of the Blacksmith lapwing! It did not dare try its scary antics on this huge intruder and all it could do is voice its displeasure as loudly as possible! Garfield dashed off to get his camera and managed to get quite a few good photos of the owl.



"The time is... let me see, er... Dinnertime!" Spotted Eagle Owl - *Bubo africanus* (Photo: Garfield Krige)

We were absolutely amazed at how tame the owl seemed to be. It would walk right past our window, (this, about a mere metre and a half away from us!) stop for a

while and turn its head in all directions and actually look at us with no apparent sense of fear or alarm. Then it would happily grab a worm or two and just carry on as if we are old friends! The next three nights we had the same visitor and it was such fun to watch its antics on the lawn, not in the least worried when one of the dogs passed close-by! Garfield has spotted it in the early hours of the morning as well a couple of days later. We also had our security camera out and it took photos of the owl going about its business till around 04h15!



"The time is... er... Bedtime!" Spotted Eagle Owl - *Bubo africanus* (Photo: Garfield Krige)

I always associated owls with catching rodents, but when I read up more about them, it seems that they do enjoy eating insects and it forms part of their diet together with other prey such as small mammals, snakes, frogs and birds. They typically hunt in an area where food is plentiful, but will leave for other areas when the source becomes depleted.

Spotted Eagle Owls mate for life and start breeding at around one year of age. They typically nest on the ground but have been known to nest on window ledges of buildings. Breeding is from July to the first weeks of February. Two to four eggs are

laid during a period of one to four days and the female is the sole incubator – leaving the nest only to eat when the male has brought food. The incubation period is around 32 days. The chicks are born blind and their eyes open after about seven days. Initially the eyes are grey, turning gradually to yellow at around two weeks. At around seven weeks of age, the young start to fly around and they leave the nest five weeks after that.

The Spotted Eagle Owl's life span is approximately ten years in the wild. This owl regularly drinks water as opposed to most other birds of prey that get their entire liquid intake from their actual prey. They also love a regular bath and in summer one can spot them during a thunderstorm, sitting with wings outspread enjoying a "shower"!

I do love owls and I have only been more excited by one other bird specie on our Estate, and that of course is the Black-chested Snake eagle. I hope that the owl will have enough food in our area and bring along some friends and settle and breed on our Estate! Unfortunately they are often killed by traffic, as they'd be sitting in the middle of the road waiting for passing rodents or eat road kill. Other major sources of mortality are from poisoning after eating poisoned rodents and also electric wires/fencing. They also fall prey to larger birds of prey and then of course human beings are once again guilty of their demise by persecuting them.

One of our plants that flowered recently is the *Barleria macrostegia*. This is quite an interesting little creeper that makes a lovely mauve flower. When the capsule is still green before flowering, it looks a lot like the underside of a crayfish! The common Afrikaans name for this plant is "Tongklapper" – literally translated as "tongue cracker". This is because this club-shaped capsule becomes dry after flowering and during rainfall in spring, it will burst open and the seeds will shoot out and distribute in this way. Now in the days when children played a lot more outside and in the veld, they would put this seemingly dead capsule in their mouths and it would "crack" open and shoot the seeds out! Very much like putting a firecracker in one's mouth!



Barleria macrostegia flower and seed capsules (Photos: Elmarie Krige)



"Mom is this ALL our property?" Yellow mongoose and baby (Photo: Elmarie Krige)

Well, this is all from me for the month of May, enjoy nature!

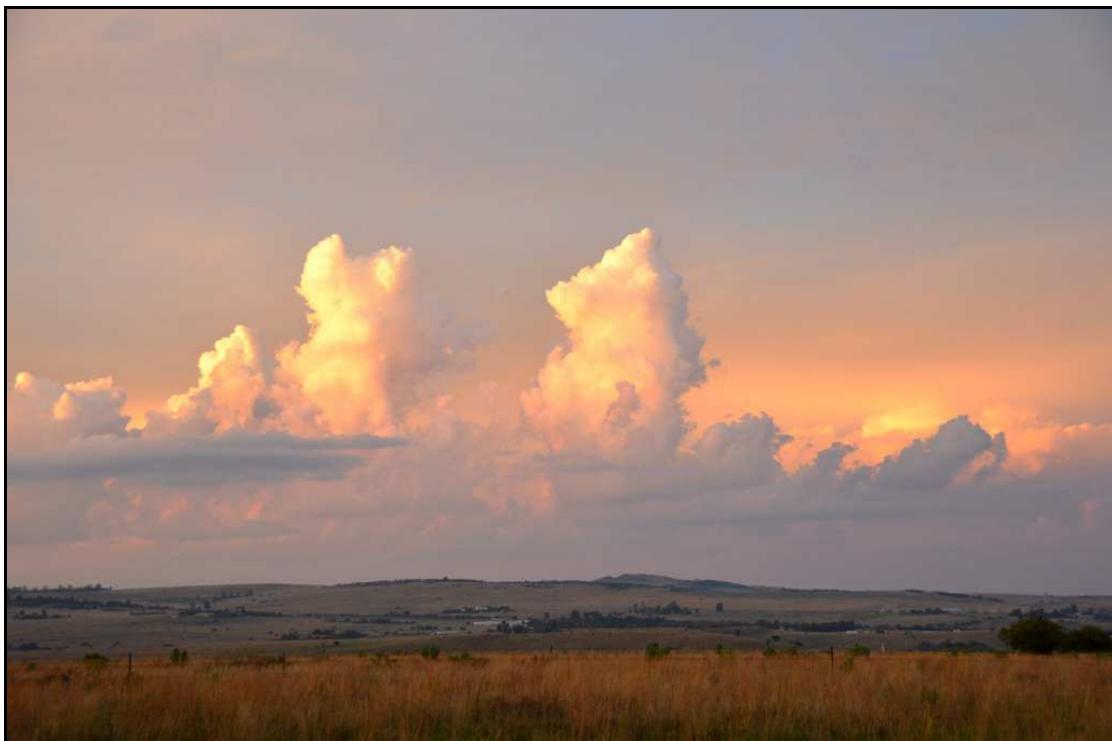
Just for fun:

A devout cowboy lost his Bible whilst mending fences out in the veld. Three weeks later an owl walks up to him carrying the Bible in its mouth. The cowboy couldn't believe his eyes, took the book from the owl, raised his eyes to the heavens and exclaimed, "It's a miracle!"

"Not really," said the owl. "Your name is written inside the cover."

Goeie dag Celtis vriende!

Herfs is my gunsteling tyd van die jaar op ons Estate. Nie net is daar bedags die lieflike "hoëveld blou" van die lug nie; maar as die son sak is daar die mooiste kleure in die lug. Daar is net nie mooier sonsondergange as hier nie - die kleure wissel van oranje en goud, na rooi, liggopers en pienk. Soms lyk die kleure amper onnatuurlik! As ons die kans kry sit ons graag op ons balkon en bekyk die laatmiddag doenighede van voëls wat vir oulaas 'n happie kom soek; dis so lekker om daardie tyd van die dag die heerlike stilte hier te beleef. My gunsteling tyd van die dag om buite te wees!



Ons het al voorheen gesien dat, as ons die jaar 'n baie droë somer gehad het, die rooi miere sommer in ons grasperk sal intrek – dalk op soek na kos, ek weet nie. Ongelukkig ry die arme erdwurms aan die pen. Soos die miere intrek, so kom die arme erdwurms na bo om te probeer ontfug van die predatore.

Hierdie is natuurlik 'n groot fees vir die Kiewiete en Dikkoppe wat hulself knuppeldik kom vreet aan die onverwagte meevalertjie. Die Bontkiewiet, hoewel die kleinste van die klomp, is baie astrant. Luidkeels probeer hy almal van "sy" grasperk verwilder. Ons sit soms en lag vir die storie, die Dikkop maak sy vlerke oop om bietjie meer gevaarlik te probeer lyk, maar dit sit die Bontkiewiet glad nie af nie. Die spul jaag mekaar heen en weer en die wat nie help jaag nie kry dan vinnig 'n kansie om 'n paar bekke-vol te gryp voor hy hulle weer bestorm. Op die ou einde kry hy ook nie te veel geëet nie – hy is te besig om die ander voëls te verjaag!

Saans as ons TV kyk, hou ons altyd die vensters en gordyne wyd oop sodat ons so tussendeur al die manewales kan bekyk. Goeie Vrydaggaand het ons soos gewoonlik sit en TV kyk toe die Bontkiewiet net al luder reg voor die TV-kamer se venster begin tekere gaan. Ek sê naderhand vir Garfield maar dis eienaardig, hy gaan so tekere en bly kyk vir ons so al asof hy iets wil sê. Toe Garfield half opstaan om te sien of daar nou nie dalk 'n slang of 'n ding op die grasperk is nie sien hy mooitjies 'n pragtige groot Gevlekte Ooruil (*Bubo africanus*) wat op ons sonwyser sit! Nie eers sewe meter weg van waar ons met TV geraas, oop vensters en 'n geselsery sit, sit die knaap asof die plek aan hom behoort! Garfield het vinnig sy kamera gaan haal en 'n hele paar pragtige foto's kon kry.



"Ek sien jou...!" Gevlekte Ooruil - *Bubo africanus* (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Elke nou en dan hop hy af op die grasperk en vergryp hom aan die eet-soveel-as-jy-wil fees, tot groot ontsteltenis van die Bontkiewiet. Hier het hy beslis sy Moses teëgekom en sou nie waag om hierdie reuse indringer te probeer verwilder nie! Al wat hy kon doen is om sy misnoeë luidkeels te kenne te gee. Hy het natuurlik gehoop ons sou dalk namens hom die uil verwilder!

Ons kon eintlik nie glo hoe mak die uil was nie. Terwyl ons honde kom en gaan, die ligte aan is en ons binne rondbeweeg is hy heel houtgerus besig om homself op die grasperk te geniet. Soms het hy reg voor die oop venster gaan sit – nie eers twee meter van waar ons binne besig was nie, sy kop rondgedraai soos hulle mos maar doen, dan gou weer 'n happie gegryp en verder rondgestap. Dit was nou 'n lekker verrassing om so pragtige voël sommer hier by ons te sien.

Die volgende paar aande het hy ook kom kuier en ons het ons verkyk aan die pragtige voël. Garfield het hom selfs hier in die vroeë oggendure gesien waar hy steeds weglê aan die arme erdwurms. Ons het selfs die een nag ons sekuriteitskamera gestel en toe ons die volgende dag kyk, was daar sommer klomp

foto's waar hy basies deurnag op die grasperk rondkuier – tot so laat (of dan so vroeg!) as 04h15!

Mens is geneig om te dink uile maak net jag op muise en rotte maar toe ek nou bietjie gaan oplees sien ek dat hulle wel graag insekte eet. Dis nou bo en behalwe hul gewone dieet van knaagdiere en ander klein soogdiertjies, slange, paddas en voëltjies. Mens vind hulle gewoonlik in areas waar daar volop prooi is, maar hulle verlaat ook weer die area sou die prooi minder beskikbaar raak.



"Man, hierdie grasperk is vol kos!" Gevlekte Ooruil - *Bubo africanus* (Foto: Garfield Krige)

Die Gevlekte Ooruil kies net een lewensmaat en kan gewoonlik op eenjarige ouderdom begin broei. Tipies sal hulle nes bou op die grond maar daar is ook al neste op vensterlyste van hoë geboue gevind. Die broeiseisoen is vanaf Julie tot en met die eerste week in Februarie. Die wyfie lê gewoonlik twee tot vier eiers oor 'n tydperk van 1-4 dae en sy is ook die een wat die broeiwerk doen. Sy sal slegs die nes verlaat om te eet wat se kos die mannetjie ook al aandra.

Die kleintjies broei na sowat 32 dae uit. Die kleintjies word blind gebore en na sowat sewe dae gaan hul oë oop. Die oë is aanvanklik grys en verander geleidelik na geel rondom ouderdom van twee weke. Op ouderdom van sewe weke sal die kleintjies begin rondvlieg en na 'n verdere vyf weke sal hulle die nes verlaat. Die lewensduurte van die gevlekte ooruil is sowat tien jaar in die natuur.

Anders as meeste roofvoëls wat hul al vog uit hul prooi kry, drink die Gevlekte Ooruil graag water. Hierdie uil geniet ook graag 'n gereelde bad en gedurende somer donderstorms kan mens hul met wydgespreide vlerke onder die "stort" sien sit!

Ek hou vreeslik baie van uile en laas wat ek so opgewonde oor 'n voëlspesie was, was toe ons die Swartborsslangarendie eerste keer op die Estate gesien het. Ek hoop tog die uil vind genoeg kos hier rond en besluit sommer om 'n paar vriende hiernatoe te nooi en permanent op ons Estate te kom woon! Ongelukkig val hul gereeld ten prooi van motoriste. Hulle sit gereeld in die middel van die pad en wag vir 'n happie om verby te kom of smul aan iets wat raakgery is en so kom baie dan aan hul einde as hulself dan raakgery word. Andersins sterf baie van hulle omdat mense knaagdiere vergiftig en hulle die vergiftigde diere dan eet. Nog 'n rede vir sterftes onder die uile is elektriese drade/omheinings asook ander groter roofvoëls en dan natuurlik weer die mens wat hulle jag.

Een van die plante wat onlangs geblom het is die *Barleria macrostegia*. Die rankplantjie dra 'n pragtig sage pers blommetjie en die Afrikaanse volksnaam is die Tongklapper. Die blommetjie van hierdie rankplantjie groei reg uit die kapsule en die kapsule lyk vir my, as dit nog groen is, kompleet soos die onderkant van 'n kreef! Na die blomtydperk droog hierdie kapsule uit en sodra die lentereëns val, bars dit oop en die saadjies skiet uit om so te versprei. Die rankplantjie het sy naam gekry toe kinders nog baie in die veld gespeel het. Sodra die kapsule na die blomtyd nou uitdroog, het die kinders die gedeelte in hul monde gesteek en van die nattigheid in hul monde het die kapsule dan oopgebars en die saadjies uitgeskiet – kompleet asof mens 'n klapper (soos in vuurwerk!) eet!



Barleria macrostegia - Tongklapper blom en saadkapsule (Foto's: Elmarie Krige)



"O, Mamma, maar ons bly in 'n mooi plek!" - Rooimeerkat ma en kleintjie (Foto: Elmarie Krige)

Van my is dit al vir die maand, geniet die buitelug!

Net vir die grap:

Die verkeerskonstabel stop die Brakpanner omdat net een van sy kar se hoofligte brand. Brakpanner: " Tjomma, dis loadshedding, ek sal later die anner een aansit, okay?"

References/Bronnelys: Roberts Bird Guide - Chittenden Hugh; Wikipedia; Alicia Grobler - MSc(Botany); Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of the Highveld – Braam van Wyk and Sasa Malan

Totsiens, goodbye, adios, ciao, yia sas en do svidaniya!

