

## *Celtis africana*

Sterkfontein Country Estates

January/Januarie 2014

Its never easy for me to pick a specific theme for my monthly letter – there are just so many interesting things to write about! Some time ago I received an e-mail from Michael van Harmelen (SCE157) about a “visitor” they had in their house (see photo) and planned to write about the snakes of our area in this issue. However, one morning in December, I got two excited sms's from fellow-Sterfonteinites and there and then decided to use it as a theme for my letter!

A specific page of all the snakes found on our Estate, is on the website. So have a look at the page, where you'd be surprised to find how many snakes have been identified on our Estate, plus photos and other information!

Around 18 December I first got a very excited mms from Carolien Botha (SCE175) about a tortoise they saw in the road. Her little boy went to pick it up and move it out of danger's way. A little later I got another mms from Elise Mitchell (SCE167) about a tortoise she found near her house in the road that same morning! It must've been the same one as they live not too far from each other.

I was so glad to hear that they did not try to capture and keep it as a “pet”, but instead just moved it out of harm's way and let it go its own way. People tend to pick up a tortoise alongside a road and keep it in a little camp in the backyard, thinking it would be happy. This is illegal as one needs a permit to keep a tortoise and to take a free-roaming animal out of its habitat is just plain wrong.

By taking it out of its natural habitat to keep in a little camp, may cause it to die much sooner than it would have in the wild. The change of habitat and an insufficient diet lacking proper nutrients and fibre it can only get by being free in nature, is the cause of many a tortoise's early demise.

I don't understand why anyone would want to keep them as pets – they cannot bark to warn you of intruders; they can't be taught tricks like a dog; they won't come when you call them – honestly, they just look far better in free nature!

Unfortunately due to urbanisation, the existence of several kinds of tortoises is being severely threatened. Natural flora and vleiland is being destroyed to make space for housing and farming projects and thereby reducing the habitat of these animals. Pollution is another problem as plastic bags, drifting on water, are seen as food and swallowed by turtles living in vleiland areas causing them to suffocate and die. Tortoises are a source of food for some people or they are just killed to use the shells to make all kinds of touristy things to be sold. It can't be easy being a tortoise!

Over the years we have found a couple of tortoises on our property and it was always a good to know we do still have some wildlife on the Estate. This tortoise is known as the mountain- or leopard tortoise. Scientific name: *Stigmochelys pardalis* and it is the only member of the genus *Stigmochelys* (in the past it was commonly placed in the *Geochelone*). The generic name is a combination of two Greek words, *Stigma* meaning “mark” or “point” and *Chelone* meaning “tortoise”. Its specific name, *pardalis* is from the Latin word *pardus*, meaning leopard and refers to the leopard-like spots and colouring on its shell. The attractively patterned shell serves as camouflage in the wild.

Interesting facts about tortoises:

Average age reached is between 20-40 years but records exist of them reaching 150 years! Typically they reach a length of 46cm and weight of about 18kg, however larger examples can reach a length of 70cm and a weight of up to 54kg.

Like other reptiles the tortoise is cold-blooded and in the morning likes to lie in the sun to warm up before they can function properly.

Leopard tortoises are herbivorous and its high-fibrous diet consists of mixed grasses and succulents. They don't have teeth, but rather sharp, horn-like beaks with which to tear their food and food is swallowed without chewing it first.

They are more defensive than offensive and will retract the head and feet into the shell for protection, often accompanying by a hissing sound. This sound is probably due to the squeezing of air from the lungs whilst retracting the limbs and head.

Sexual maturity is reached between 12 and 15 years of age; however, in captivity it grows quicker and can reach maturity by age 6. After mating, the female will dig a hole in the ground with her hind legs and lay a clutch of between 5 and 18 (more have been recorded) eggs. Once she has laid the eggs, she will carefully close the hole, still with the hind legs, stamping the soil and covering the area with grass and leaves, making it difficult to find the spot. And that's it – no motherly instincts as far as rearing the young is concerned - they are on their own once they have hatched! The normal incubation period is between 8 and 14 months, however this is subject to the climate and temperature as well as different species.

Baby tortoises have a sharp protrusion, called an egg tooth, on its upper beak. This is used to open up the egg to get to the outside world. This egg tooth will eventually wear away as it matures.

The shell consists of two layers, an outer layer of hornlike plates and an inner bone-like layer. The inner layer is its skeleton. The rounded part of the shell is called the carapace and the flat part under the belly is the plastron. The carapace and plastron is attached to the body with a bone-like structure.

A leopard tortoise can drink vast amounts of water and also love to take a “bath”. The rear legs are trunk-like and the front legs are almost paddle-shaped and “pigeon-toed” with a row of small nails. They can move quite fast over rocky terrain and can even climb!

To me a tortoise looks very wise – probably because they can get so old and who knows, if they could talk, what they could tell us! When you encounter one, do leave them to be free as nature intended them to be!

Sources:

Branch, Bill – A field guide to the snakes and other reptiles of South Africa;

Butchart, Duncan – Wild about Johannesburg;

Various websites including Wikipedia, africantortoise.com, etc



**Michael van Harmelen's (SCE 157) “visitor” – no harm was done as it was safely released**



**Leopard tortoise – Photo Elise Mitchell (SCE 167)**



Leopard tortoise – Photo Carolien Botha (SCE 175)

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**On a lighter note: What does a tortoise use to communicate? A shellphone!**

**What does a tortoise do on it's birthday? It shell-abrates!**

**Net vir die grap: Drie slakke sit op 'n skilpad wat rondstap. Die een slak skree: "Vashou ouens, hierdie knaap is vinnig!"**

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The New Year saw the arrival of a baby zebra on the Trichardt's property (SCE136) and we quickly went over to take a picture. The mom and rest of the clan were very protective, moving around the little thing and it was quite hard to take a picture! Do have a look when driving past their property – it is just such a perfect little thing!

Kyk bietjie, volgende keer as jul by die Trichardts se plot (SCE136) verbyry, wat het die ooievaar vroeg in die Nuwe Jaar vir hulle gebring! Alhoewel Louis en Sonja nog nie weet of hulle nou 'n oupa of 'n ouma is nie, is die kleinding

perfek! Die res van die zebra familie is heel beskermd teenoor die kleintjie wat fotonemery nogal bemoeilik het.

Garfield Krige (SCE 129) managed to get close to our Black-Chested Snake Eagle youngster, which at long last have left the nest and seem to be doing well! Have a look at the fierce yellow eye - what a beautiful bird and we are very proud to have them on our Estate!

Ons tiener Swartbors Slangarend het uiteindelik die nes verlaat en het ontpop in 'n lieflike voël – kyk net die pragtige geel oë! Garfield Krige (SCE129) kon bietjie nadergaan en die trotse voël afneem. Wat 'n plesier dat hulle hul tuiste hier gemaak het!



**Photo: Louis Trichardt (SCE 136)**



**Photo: Garfield Krige (SCE 129)**



Young Black-Chested Snake Eagle - Photo: Garfield Krige (SCE 129) 05/01/2014

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The pompom weed (*Campuloclinium macrocephalum*) problem that is in full bloom all over the countryside as well as in patches on our Estate needs to be addressed seriously. This is NOT a beautiful wildflower! We were shocked over the holidays, driving to Hartbeespoort for a lunch, to see how this pest has taken over some areas.

There is unfortunately no easy solution in eradicating this weed. It spreads very easily from seed as well as regenerating from underground rhizomes. When you see it on your property or even alongside our road, try to dig it out by getting to the underground roots. By just trying to pull it out, in most cases the underground rhizomes will stay and it will just pop up again.

It originates from Central America (Mexico to Argentina) and has no uses for us at all. It was originally introduced for ornamental purposes, but is now a noxious weed. It causes SERIOUS degradation of the veld, lowering the biodiversity and reducing greatly the grazing capacity. It is totally unpalatable to large herbivores, so it has no enemies in our country.

**What is its invasive status in South Africa?** Existing legislation: CARA 2002 – Category 1 Proposed legislation: NEMBA – Category 1b in Gauteng, North West, Limpopo and Mpumalanga; 1a in the rest of South Africa

- A very useful website to see what plants or animals are considered invasive, go to [www.invasives.org.za](http://www.invasives.org.za).



Pompom weed (photo: Garfield Krige)

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Dis elke maand vir my moeilik om 'n tema vir my brief te kies want daar is soveel wonderlike dinge op ons Estate om oor te skryf! Na 'n e-pos van Michael van Harmelen (SCE157) met 'n foto van 'n ongenooide "besoeker" in hul huis, was ek vas van plan om meer oor die slange van ons omgewing te skryf. Toe kry ek egter 2 SMS'e in Desember oor 'n skilpad en besluit daar en dan om dit as tema vir my brief te gebruik.

Daar is dus 'n spesiale bladsy op ons webwerf net oor die slange van Sterkfontein en, hoewel grillerig, is dit interessant om te sien wat alles hier voorkom, so loer gerus!

Om en by 18 Desember het ek eers 'n opgewonde mms van Carolien Botha (SCE175) ontvang oor 'n skilpad wat hulle in die pad gekry het en wat haar seuntjie gou na veiligheid gedra het. Net daarna ontvang ek toe 'n boodskap en foto van Elise Mitchell (SCE167) wat sy ook in die pad naby haar huis gesien het. Dit moet sekerlik dieselfde skillie wees aangesien hulle naby mekaar woon.

Ek was so bly dat hulle nou nie weer probeer het om dit te vang en as 'n "troeteldier" êrens in hul erf in 'n kampie te sit nie. Skilpaaie moet vry in die natuur beweeg en mens het 'n permit nodig om hul aan te hou.

Persoonlik verstaan ek nie die “troeteldier” konsep nie – hulle kan jou tog nie waarsku met geraas teen oortreders op jou erf nie; mens kan hul nie toertjies aanleer soos met ‘n hond nie en mens kan hul ook nie ‘n naam gee en nader roep nie – dit werk net nie so nie! Hulle lyk mos net beter in die vrye natuur waar hul hoort. Oor die jare hier, het ons nou en dan van die skilpaaie teëgekom en dis darem lekker om te hoor dat daar steeds van hulle rondwaal.

Weereens is die mens die grootste vyand van hierdie diere. Hulle word wederregtelik uit hul natuurlike vrye habitat geneem en in kampies aangehou. Sodoende kry hul meestal nie die regte natuurlike veselagtige verskeidenheid van grasse en kos soos in die natuur en sterf soms lank voor hul in die vrye natuur sou. Daar is ook mense wat hul as kos sien en daarvoor doodmaak, of soms word hul eenvoudig doodgemaak om die doppe vir allerhande simpel toersiste maaksels te gebruik!

Besoedeling is ook ‘n groot probleem. Die tipe wat in vleiland-areas voorkom, sien bv ‘n drywende plastieksak aan vir kos, sluk dit in en versmoor so op ‘n grusame wyse. Natuurlik met die uitbreiding en vergroting van woongebiede word die diere se habitat verder versteur en verklein – ai, dis swaar om ‘n skilpad te wees!

Hierdie skilpad is bekend as die berg- of luiperdskilpad en dis maklik om te sien waar die naam, luiperdskilpad, vandaan kom, as mens na die kleure en vlekke op die dop kyk. Hierdie kleure help hul natuurlik as kamoeflering in die veld. Die wetenskaplike naam is *Stigmochelys pardalis* en is die enigste lid van die genus *Stigmochelys* (dit was voorheen vervat in die genus *Geochelone*). Die genusnaam is ‘n kombinasie van twee Griekse woorde, naamlik *Stigma* wat “merk” of “punt” beteken en *Chelone* wat skilpad beteken. Die spesienaam, *pardalis*, is van die Latyns *pardus* afkomstig, wat luiperd beteken en dit verwys natuurlik na die vlekke of kolle op die dop.

Interessante feite oor die skilpad:

Algemene ouderdom is 20-40 jaar maar daar bestaan geskrewe rekord van 150 jaar oue skilpad! Algemene lengte is 46cm met ‘n gewig van sowat 18kg maar groteres bereik lengtes van 70cm met ‘n gewig van 54kg.

Soos ander reptiele, is skilpaaie koudbloedig en moet soggens eers in die son lê en opwarm om voldoende te kan funksioneer.

Die luiperd- of bergskilpad, is ‘n herbivoor. Hul dieet bestaan hoofsaaklik uit veselagtige verskeidenheid grasse asook sukkulente. Skilpaaie het nie tande nie, maar skerp bekrande waarmee kos aangepluk word. Kos word ook nie gekou nie, maar net so afgesluk. Soms lyk dit of hul wel kou maar dit word letterlik ingewerk!

Skilpaaie het oor die algemeen nie aanvallende gedrag nie maar sal, wanneer gevaaer dreig, vinnig die kop en bene in hul doppe intrek. Dit gaan gepaard

met 'n sisgeluid wat waarskynlik is omdat die lug uit die lange gepers word deur die intrekaksie van die kop en bene.

Geslagsryheid is gewoonlik op die ouderdom van 12 – 15 jaar hoewel dit soms in aanhouding op so vroeg as 6 jaar mag geskied. Na paring sal die wyfie op 'n gesikte plek 'n gat in die grond met haar agterbene grou. Tussen 5 en 18 eiers (soms meer!) word versigtig gelê en die gat word, weereens, met die agterbene versigtig toegekrap, vasgestamp en met blare en grassie bedek. Dis nie maklik om so nes te ontdek nadat sy dit gekamoefleer het nie! Daarna is die kleintjies op hul eie – sy het nie verder 'n saak met haar kinders en het geen moederlike instinkte nie! Die inkubasietydperk vir die eiers is oor die algemeen tussen 8 en 14 maande, maar dit hang ook af van klimaat en temperatuur asook verskillende spesies van skilpaaie.

Babaskilpaaie het 'n sogenaamde eiertand, 'n horingagtige uitgroeisel aan hul bolip waarmee hul uit die eierdop deurbreek. Mettertyd, soos die kleintjie grootword, sal dit weg verweer.

Die dop van 'n skilpad bestaan uit twee lae naamlik 'n buitelaag van horingagtige plate, en 'n benerige binnelaag. Die binnelaag is deel van die skilpad se geraamte. Die geronde deel van die dop word die karapaks genoem en die platterige deel onder die buik is die plastron. Die karapaks en plastron word aan die liggaam geheg met 'n benerige struktuur, bekend as die brug. Die bergskilpad kan met tye baie water drink en neem graag 'n "bad".

Die skilpad se agterbene laat mens dink aan boomstompe en die voorbene het weer 'n amperse roeispaan voorkoms – ook so bietjie bakbeen met 'n ry "naels", maar boeta, hulle kan heel rats oor moeilike en klipperige terrein wegkom, en, snaakse bene en al, kan hulle selfs heel goed klim!

Vir my lyk 'n skilpad altyd baie slim – seker omdat hulle oud lyk en omdat hulle so oud *kan* word. Wie weet wat hulle alles oor hul omswerwinge kon vertel as hul net kon praat! As julle een teëkom – laat hy maar liewer op sy reis voortstap in die vrye natuur waar hy hoort!

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