

January 2015

### Selso's story

Although there are many achievements and always a strong sense of worthwhileness, our work at the SPCA is often sad, so any memorable and uplifting animal story is something we love to share, especially when it's as important as this one.

In June 2013, uShaka received a call that a young southern elephant seal in emaciated condition and with a deep wound under its chin had been washed up at Southbroom. The seal was less than six years old and was starving. Staff member Colette Bodestaff and colleague Nikhiel immediately went to Southbroom. Colette's passion is seals and their rehabilitation, but she had no experience with this particular species which is seldom found in our waters.

The young seal was rushed to the uShaka Sea World Rehabilitation Centre. He weighed only 73 kg and food, vitamins and medication had to be given with the utmost care, but within two days he was eating fish from Colette's hand.

When someone put a blue cushion on the floor to sit on while observing Selso, the seal decided that this was his cushion and took to lying on it. More blue cushions were brought in. He slept on them every night.

He grew steadily over the next two months. It was necessary that he moulted before a satellite tracking device, fitted with epoxy, was fitted to his new hair. This would provide much needed information about the movements of the species. There have been occasional strandings off our KZN coastline, but it was not known where these isolated individuals had come from or where they were intending to go.

Selso's moult took eleven weeks instead of the usual six weeks for elephant seals. Preparations began for his release. He was fed in the water rather than by hand. A transport crate was custom-made and left in his living area, along with the blue cushions to which he was so partial. Everything was done to minimise the stress of the sea journey to where he would be released.

He now weighed a healthy 180kg. Five days before his release, a satellite transmitter was epoxied to the top of his head, and two small permanent tags were attached to his flippers in case he was found beached anywhere in the world.

He had been at Sea World for six months, and there were tears at SAAMBR (The South African Association for Marine Biological Research) at his departure, but also joy at knowing that he was going back to his rightful world. He remained calm in his crate as the *Sinfonia* left Durban *en route* for Port Elizabeth. Throughout the journey he could see the sea, breathe in the salty ozone, and feel the sun and wind on his coat.

The moment came for his release. The crate was lowered into the sea. The gate was raised, and Selso was back in the ocean. He looked back briefly. Then he dived. A minute later, Colette saw his head about 300 metres from the ship.

There were daily updates on his progress as he made his way south. He was expected to return to land around November, which is the beginning of the breeding season, but this would be only a social meeting-up with others of his species, as he was too young to breed.

By 9 May he was 2 700 nautical miles from South Africa. After only a week, he headed north again along the route he had taken on the way south. At the end of June, he came ashore on Marion Island and was photographed by the research staff. He was looking good. By the end of July he was 122 nautical miles from the Eastern Cape coast, and on 3 August he came ashore near Mazeppa Bay on the Transkei coast. He fed off the continental shelf for six weeks and then came ashore in the Tsitsikama Reserve on 19 October. On 15 November he came ashore at Cape Recife Nature Reserve. He was moulting, and his satellite tracker was about to fall off.

Scientists had gleaned vital information from the daily tracking reports and needed to reattach his satellite tracking device once he had finished moulting. For this reason, he was taken into Bayworld Centre for Research and Education in Port Elizabeth on 18 November and remained there for three weeks before being released on the continental shelf. Within two days he was heading south once more.

This is just a brief summary of a remarkable rehabilitation by Durban's uShaka Sea World Rehabilitation Centre and tells nothing of the dedication and expertise of those who made it possible or of the affection felt for this young mammal as they nurtured him in preparation for the astonishing journeys that make up the fabric of his life and have added so much to knowledge about his species.

### **The Tale of a Mouse... and a rinkhals**

It sounds like *Through the Looking Glass*, but it really happened. A mouse was seen scarpering down the aisle of a Qatar Airways jet after the plane had landed at the Adolfo Suárez Barajas Airport in Madrid, "alarming the passengers", according to the report.

The sight of this little rodent required the entire cabin to be fumigated before take-off, causing a six-hour delay for passengers waiting to board and resulting in missed connections for those who were journeying on to Thailand, Singapore and Bali. Many amused comments were published in the media.

However, when I dug around on the Internet, I found multiple stories of mice apparently intent on migrating via air travel, including one from Sydney where passengers were accommodated in hotels overnight during the mouse search. Any stowaway rodent has to be taken seriously by airlines because of the small possibility that it carries a transmittable disease. So it's all in the name of proper responsibility.

In our December issue of *The Animal Angle*, we told the story of the harmless garter snake that emptied a Swiss train and capped it with the report of a rinkhals cobra that secreted itself in Brian Mabasa's BMW parked at the Midrand Gautrain station and defied the efforts of several snake handlers to discover where it was hiding.

After five days, snake handlers were generally of the opinion that the rinkhals had returned to the veld. Mr Mabasa, although understandably cautious and anxious, was fed up with waiting and drove his car home and parked it in his garage. The following morning he saw the snake's head peeping out between the bonnet and the right headlight. After the fender had been removed, a snake handler, protected only by gloves, caught the large and extremely venomous reptile.

The Swiss garter snake story went round the world, but a rinkhals cobra in charge of a BMW for five days was less of a drama in our rather more dangerous country (except for Brian Mabasa, of course, who wisely decided to drive the family's other car for a few days just to be on the safe side).

However, the rinhals did give Gautrain executive, Errol Braithwaite, an opportunity to make an amusing contribution by way of a tongue-in-cheek statement about the intruder. We acknowledge reporter Penwell Dlamini and *Times Live* for including Mr Braithwaite's account in an article:

The Gautrain is able to confirm reports that a legless intruder of undetermined sex gained unauthorised access to the Midrand station parking from the adjacent veld... The intruder was seen to proceed to a parked vehicle and, according to reports, is successfully hiding him-/herself in the body of the vehicle in an apparent attempt to stowaway. The vehicle was surrounded by security guards who, having failed to persuade the intruder to leave, have quarantined the vehicle.

Special negotiators were brought in from the SPCA, but the standoff continues. Braithwaite said he "condemned the actions of this 'slippery' customer in the strongest terms. Once apprehended, he/she would be handed over to the nearest snake farm where we trust that the scales of justice will tilt heavily and the incarceration will be long."

### **The Tears of the Giraffe**

Those of you who have read the Alexander McCall Smith's enchanting novels about Mma Ramotswe and her No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency in Botswana will know how they warm the heart and make one chuckle and, in the unwinding of her detecting adventures, uniquely convey the moral principles that we all need to follow to be the best we can be.

At the end of *The Tears of Giraffe*, she buys a basket from a woman sitting at the roadside in Francistown. It is a traditional basket of the kind we in Africa know so well, and it has a design of a giraffe worked into the weaving.

"These little marks are tears," Mma Ramotswe says, when giving the basket away as a gift to an American client whom she has helped. "The giraffe gives its tears to the women and they weave them into the basket."

"But why did the giraffe give its tears?" the woman asks.

Mma Ramotswe hasn't really thought about this before. "I suppose it means that we can all give something," she says. "A giraffe has nothing else to give – only tears."

And then she imagines that she sees a giraffe "peering down through the trees, its strange stilt-borne body camouflaged among the leaves, and its moist velvet cheeks and liquid eyes; and she thought of the beauty that there was in Africa, and of the laughter, and the love".

"Is that true, Mma?" asks the woman's young grandson, whom Mma Ramotswe has united with his grandmother for the first time.

Mma Ramotswe smiles. "I hope so," she says.

For me, that reflects how we can weave our lives into the beauty and the sadness and the warmth and the greatness that is part of living in Africa. We can choose to make things better by noticing and caring and helping in the many small ways available to us, or we can look the other way.

In our own organisation, we rely so much on the generosity of spirit of those who give of their time as volunteers to brighten the lives of our animals, of those who leave the

bequests that are so important to our continuing effectiveness, or who leave pets' food in our trolleys at supermarkets, or support our many fund-raising events.