

The natural paradise on our doorstep

The *Berea Mail* reminded us a couple of months back that birds, butterflies, small wild animals, trees and wild flowers have two ideal natural environments in Glenwood: the reservoir site and Pigeon Valley Nature Reserve.

I have noticed a remarkable range of birdlife in my Glenwood garden over the last year or so and also so many butterflies and was interested to read that Crispin Hemson of Friends of Pigeon Valley had commented that they were noticing “a greater range of bird life coming though to the reservoir and Pigeon Valley in winter and spring”, including a European Nightjar, which is rare and becoming endangered.

“We have seen an increase in the number of seed-eating birds in the last 18 months. As well as the more common species, there have been beautiful Red Billed Fire Finches, which have never been seen in the reserve before, and also Grey Waxbills, which are beautiful creatures and also uncommon.”

After Friends of Pigeon Valley had requested that Ethekwini stop mowing the reservoir site and allow the natural grassland to flourish, and the City finally agreed to mow only the area around the ventilation shafts, the result was the present diversity of grasses, plants, wild flowers and trees that flourish on the site, with “an optimal balance achieved between Pigeon Valley’s coastal forest and the reservoir’s coastal grassland”, a combination that is very attractive to birds.

There are many large spotted genets living throughout the area, also three species of mongoose, both red and blue duiker, and, of course, vervet monkeys with which most of us are familiar as they visit our Glenwood gardens so regularly in family groups.

Genets have visited my verandah and garden for many years, and a visiting technician once told me that at least one lives in the roof of the house next door.

I first learnt about my visiting genets when my friend, Jeff Gaisford, who was with Esemvelo Wildlife and well-known as their TV and print media spokesman, recognised genet scent in a corner of my garden.

After that, I have occasionally had a good view of a genet fleeing my verandah and scuttling up a nearby Melaleuca tree when I opened the door during the night to let my dogs out. Once up the tree, the genet would watch us with its large eyes and appear unafraid. Its regular mission was to polish off any food left in Bonnie’s bowl, since my Labrador, Gaby, never left any in his!

Large spotted genets are beautiful animals with long fluffy tails with broad white stripes. Bonnie, a cross Border Collie/Papillon, soon began to let me know exactly when a genet had entered ‘her’ territory during the night. Nose to ground, and undeterred by any appeals from me, she determinedly follows its unseen tracks, while I wait sleepily at the door, trying hard to be patient.

Three or four years ago, we gave readers of *The Animal Angle* some details of an M.Sc. research project on urban genets being conducted by Craig Widdows, School of Life Science, UKZN, Pietermaritzburg campus. I saw that Craig was a guest speaker at a Durban venue fairly recently and that his topic was on genets. He is a specialist in this field and would always welcome information from people whose properties harbour these beautiful creatures who go about their lives so silently and unobtrusively.

Anyone interested in finding out more about Pigeon Valley might care to look it up on Wikipedia. It is remarkable for its biodiversity and is a treasure that is often overlooked.

3D-printed rhino horn

A year ago, I put aside a cutting reporting that an American company, Pembient, in Seattle had mastered technology that would allow them to create fake rhino horns that are genetically identical to real horn.

The company claimed that this would reduce rhino poaching, since the 'printed' horn would be indistinguishable from actual rhino horn. The CEO said that a survey they had conducted indicated that about 45% of users would accept rhino horn made in a laboratory.

But would many buyers really accept a version created by technology? Rhino horn qualifies as a status symbol in many parts of the Far East. When my granddaughter, Cate, was teaching in Vietnam, a private student of hers was much envied for having been given a R250,000 container of rhino horn by her father as a birthday gift. She was taken aback when Cate told her that she would no longer be able to have her as a student as killing rhino for their horns was deeply reprehensible, and the demand for rhino horn in the East was driving the rhino into extinction.

Nonetheless, bioengineered wildlife products constitute a real effort to save animal species from extinction. The problem will be in getting the buyers to accept genetically identical bioengineered horn. (Google Pembient to learn more.)

Milk sharks at Vetch's

Photographs of a harmless milk shark off Vetch's beach went viral earlier this year amid rumours that it was a Great White cruising uncomfortably close to surfers. Milk sharks average about 1,1 metres in length, but have been found to measure up to 1,78 metres off our western coast, so can be quite startling to a surfer or swimmer wrongly identifying them.

Surfer Karl Oftebro, who took the pictures that appeared with a *Daily News* article earlier this year, dismissed the rumours being spread via social media by reporting that Durban surfers are quite used to milk sharks, and that they are not at all dangerous.

In their book, *Coastal Fishes of Southern Africa*, Philip and Elaine Heemstra record that the sharks acquired this name owing to an Indian belief that consumption of its meat improves lactation.

The species is not under threat. The Heemstras report that their numbers have actually increased off our coastline and that this could be owing to the shark nets, which keep out the larger shark species that prey on the milk sharks.

Milk sharks are found in many of the oceans of the world and at levels from near the surface to as deep as 200 metres. They are also known to enter estuaries and swim quite a way upriver, although nothing like the distances that can be achieved by the dangerous Zambezi or Van Rooyen shark (known as the bull shark in Australia) that has been found in places like near the foot of the Victoria Falls, far up the Limpopo in the Kruger National Park, and below the Cahora Bassa in Mozambique.

I remember the favourite old Zambezi joke that did the rounds when I was editor of the magazine, *Field and Tide*, in my youth before I took to the academic life. Here it is:

A party of tourists boating not far from the foot of the Victoria Falls were finding the hot weather hard to handle. They asked their guide whether it was safe to swim as they had seen crocodiles earlier on. "No crocodiles here," he reassured them, so they stripped off and frolicked in the water. After they had climbed back into the boat, one of them asked him why there were no crocs in that area. "Sharks," replied this man of few words.

Perhaps this never happened and is just one of those tall tales that tourists love, but the fact is that Zambezi sharks have indeed been observed hundreds of kms upriver in numerous locations.

Be aware of bear bile farming

Could we all take a moment to thank the Animals Asia Foundation for their splendid work in working so passionately to free bears kept in small cages all their lives in Vietnam and certain other parts of the Far East and painfully 'milked' regularly for their bile.

This vile practice sounds beyond belief, and yet the people who do this appear to have no sense that it is horribly cruel. This is why education about animals is so, so important, and why we run our own SPCA humane education programme to help animals have better lives.

The following comes from the *Animals Asia Newsletter*: "2015 was a year filled with tears and triumphs. Tears as we lost some beloved bears owing to sickness and old age, but triumph as we shut down bile farming in an entire Vietnamese province and rescued 41 bears from unthinkable suffering. We can help so many animals in Asia only because of the unwavering loyalty and dedication of supporters like you."

We know that some of our loyal Durban & Coast volunteers and supporters also actively support bear rescue, and we are proud of their involvement. We care about all animals.