



AgulhasNPark eBulletin



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Wetlands for our Future

www.sanparks.org

World Wetlands Day ~ February 2

Wetlands are often thought of only in terms of their hydrological importance, but they also hold great cultural significance. Many cultures have developed traditional practices and belief systems for regulating the use of wetlands so as to protect these valuable ecosystems. Wetlands are also known as vleis, bogs, swamps, marshes or sponges. They are regarded as some of the most productive ecosystems in the world because they serve as sponges that regulate river flow, they provide habitats for a variety of plant and animal species and they help to absorb silt and cleanse water of pollutants. Wetlands are at risk due to practices of draining the land for alternative use. Construction of dams, removal of plants, waste water pumped into the wetland by industries, seepage of agricultural fertilisers and mining are all threats to these sensitive ecosystems. February 2 is the anniversary of the signing of the Ramsar Convention in 1971. The Convention took place in the Iranian city of Ramsar and is an inter-governmental treaty to promote national action and international co-operation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently 168 Contracting Parties to the Convention with 2208 wetland sites covering over 210 million hectares. **Question: Have you found your neighbourhood wetland?** The theme for World Wetlands Day 2016 is *Wetlands for our Future: sustainable livelihoods*. (SOURCE: *A Year of Special Days 2016*, Sharenet, www.worldwetlandsday.org)



Agulhas Working for Wetlands excels nationally in the workplace

The Agulhas Working for Wetlands Project achieved 90,3% in the SANParks national self-assessment standards for compliancy in office administration, fieldwork and contractors in 2015. They received the first golden certificate nationally for this achievement. Well done to Project Manager Lana Du Toit and her team! Lana was also asked to be involved in Wetlands projects in other parks nationally.

Upper Ratelrivier Waterford rehabilitation, before: 8 December 2014, after: 25 January 2016



Toekomst: follow-up, maintenance and monitoring



Agulhas Working for Wetlands project busy with rehabilitation work at the farm Toekomst after flood damage to gabion structures.



Working together to save our wetlands – Lana Du Toit, Project Manager, Agulhas Working for Wetlands project

SANParks' aquatic scientists shared their knowledge about various wetland surveys during a workshop held in Stellenbosch on January 19. The Agulhas National Park was part of the brainstorming session which looked at the findings of wetland surveys in National Parks, how best to take the new data forward, to promote collaboration and concerted action in the freshwater conservation field. Participants from Cape Nature, CSIR, SANBI, UFS and DEA attended the workshop, also aiming at learning more about assessing, conserving and managing wetlands, and new ways of analysing data and presenting these results. The process forms part of a collaboration between SANParks, scientists, GIS experts and Wetlands ecologists. Two case studies, which are ongoing, were presented. The Agulhas study was presented by Ruth-Mary Fisher from Cape Research Centre. The Mountain Zebra National Park study was presented by Dirk Roux, Specialist Scientist: Freshwater and Conservation Governance and Nancy Job, an Independent Wetland Consult. The group visited some interesting wetlands sites in the Agulhas National Park (including Soetanyenberg and Ratelrivier). The field trip highlighted freshwater and wetland conservation realities in the Agulhas area. It was led by Ruth-Mary Fisher assisted by Trevor Adams, Heidi Nieuwoudt, Nancy Job and Lana du Toit.



Ramsar sites

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat, commonly known as the Ramsar Convention was adopted in February 1971. It is an inter-governmental treaty that provided the framework for international cooperation for the conservation of wetland habitats. The broad objectives of the Convention are to stem the loss of wetlands, to promote the wise use of wetlands, to promote special protection of listed wetlands, to promote the training of personnel and to promote the implementation of obligations under the Convention. The Ramsar Convention defines wetlands as: *"areas of marsh, fen, peatlands or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters"*. These areas may include adjacent riparian and coastal zones. (Wetland restoration, ed. by Cleaver and Brown, 2005; www.ramsar.org)



De Mond, a Ramsar site on your doorstep

De Mond Nature Reserve is located 26km south-east of Bredasdorp on the south-western Cape coast. The reserve lies at the mouth of the Heuningnes River, between the coastal villages of Arniston (Waenhuiskrans) and Struisbaai. It is 954ha in size and comprises former sections of the farms Zoetendals Vallei and Bushy Park. De Mond was proclaimed a Nature Reserve in 1986. In October 1986 the Heuningnes Estuary at De Mond Nature Reserve was proclaimed a Ramsar site. De Mond Nature Reserve is part of Cape Nature, the provincial conservation body. (SOURCE: *De Mond brochure*.)

Pictures in this edition by L. Du Toit, C. Steyn, W. De Klerk, S. Brink, M. Raselabe, L. Lewis

Wetland birding in the Agulhas Plains - Wim de Klerk

World Wetlands Day is celebrated on February 2 every year and this gives us the opportunity to reflect on our own in the Agulhas Plains and I have the need to make a bold statement: **The rehabilitation of wetlands in the Agulhas Plains is probably one of the best stories internationally in a long time.** For six years I have travelled the plains recording the birds of the Agulhas Plains and the natural beauty that unfolded over the past six years is just extraordinary. The management and staff of the Agulhas NP and Nuwejaarsrivier SMA should be so proud of what they have achieved. Since the removal of the alien forests which covered large areas of the plains, the wetlands certainly are wet! Large pans that normally dried up during the year, now seems permanently covered with water. Whether this is permanent or simply due to a very wet season, only time will tell.



Special wetland species spotted in 2015

Some very special wetland species were recorded during 2015. These included: **African Purple Swamphen**, Grootkoningriethaan, *Porphyrio madagascariensis*; **African Snipe**, Afrikaanse Snip, *Gallinago nigripennis*; **Chestnut-banded Plover**, Rooibandstrandkiewiet, *Charadrius pallidus*; **Curlew Sandpiper**, Krombekstrandloper, *Calidris ferruginea*; **Glossy Ibis**, Glansibis, *Plegadis falcinellus*; **Hottentot Teal**, Gevlekte eend, *Anas hottentota*; **Purple Heron**, Rooireier, *Ardea purpurea*. The most exciting discovery though, was the increase in immature and juvenile African Marsh-Harrier, Afrikaanse vleivalk, *Circus ranivorus*. At first it was thought it could be chance, but then it was noticed that the majority were young birds. The question is why? More species will be showed in the March issue.



The **African Marsh-Harrier, Afrikaanse vleivalk, *Circus ranivorus*** hunts for food by quartering one to three metres above the vegetation away from wetlands, over drier flood plains. Since the alien tree removal, their habitat has increased tenfold. The remaining fynbos and renosterveld are ideal habitat for them. Alien trees formed a thick canopy of about three metres high, obscuring the prey of this species.



Agulhas Rangers assisted with Elim fire-suppression measures in January



Camera trap sightings in Agulhas National Park



Spotted in the Park...



Pictures: Trevor Adams

Berg dahlia, *Liparia splendens*

Keys handed over at Ratelrivier project site



The Ratelrivier project site was officially handed over to the contractor, BFT Communication on January 25. Section Ranger Masindi Raselabe conducted induction training for contractors and staff on the day.

The evolving of Ratelrivier over time

Over the years Ratelrivier has meant different things to its owners. During the Van Breda-family era in the 19th century the Ratelrivier farmstead was frequented by regular visitors and was alive with social and hunting parties. The Fletcher family took over the farm towards the end of the 19th century and especially Steven Fry always had a love for nature. He regularly took his children horse-riding and he taught them “veld lore, the names of the wild flowers, where to find them, when and how to pick them. He was way ahead of his time when it came to conservation of flora and fauna. Everything that creeps or crawls or flies or runs or swims was important, but especially “his” buck, Bontebok, until they were removed in 1936 to the Bontebok Reserve, then on the Zeekoeivlei property. The little “bokkies” meant just as much to him - duikers, vlakbokkies, rhebok and steenbok”. When the Corders took over in 1946 they used Ratelrivier as a holiday farm. In 1950 Lord Vincent De Saumarez bought Ratelrivier. Lady Du Saumarez preferred Ratelrivier and went to live permanently on Ratelrivier after her husband’s death in 1969. She passed away in 1985 and after this period Ratelrivier was used as a holiday farm again. The De Havilland family rented the farm from the De Saumarez family from 1991. They established a wildflower business from the fynbos and cleared the infestations of alien plants. They re-fenced the property and established a private nature reserve, notable for its Bontebok and Micro frogs. They lived there until the farm was bought by SANParks in 2003. Descendants of farm workers remember the vleie full of Thatching reed, *Elegia sp*, Painted ladies, *Gladiolus sp* and Chinchinchees, *Ornithogalum sp* and the water with Geelbekeendjies, Yellow-billed Duck, *Anas undulata* flying in in droves during the rainy season. After extensive alien clearing and restoration to the wetlands, Ratelrivier as a prime conservation area is becoming a reality. (SOURCE: *The History of Ratelrivier*, as told by Nell Naudé, neé Fry; pictures from Naudé family album).



"Leap Day" for Frogs on February 29

Amphibians, which are the oldest land vertebrates, having lived in Greenland 362 million years ago, are currently the most threatened class of vertebrate on Earth. Frogs are good bio-indicators, due to their biphasic life cycles and sensitive skins - the fact that one third of all species are threatened should be an important warning to humans that our global environment is in jeopardy. (www.leapdayforfrogs.org.za/index.html). 2015 was measured as the hottest year ever.

