



AgulhasNPark eBulletin

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“Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.” – Aldo Leopold

World Nature Conservation Day

Celebrated on July 28 each year, World Nature Conservation Day recognises that a healthy environment is the foundation for a stable and productive society. To ensure the well-being of present and future generations, we all must participate to protect, conserve, and sustainably manage our natural resources. We all depend on natural resources like water, air, soil, minerals, trees, animals, food, and gas to live our daily lives. To keep the balance in the natural world, we must also help various species to continue to exist. A report from the global World Wildlife Foundation suggests that since 1970, the pressure that we exert on the planet has doubled and the resources upon which we depend have declined by 33 percent. Conservation of nature is very important, with scientists warning of mass extinctions in the near future. Many nature documentaries show resources that are being wasted. We have made this planet a world of steel and concrete to sustain humanity but at the cost of other species. Trees and plants absorb carbon dioxide, a gas which has increased the planet's temperature, increased storms and sea level rises and freshwater glacier melting. Glaciers are connected to rivers and lakes which we depend on for drinking water through city/town/community. Birds, bees and other insects pollinate the plants we need to eat to stay healthy nutritionally. Factory foods provide reduced quality in favour of the financial incentive.

World Nature Conservation Day



Children who spend time exercising their senses in nature have been shown to increase their skills at a faster rate than those who do not. Our planet provides us with all of the resources that modern exploitation have given us, through wood, medicine, water, plants and animals to eat, metals, vitamins, minerals - yet it is exploited for money with systems of varied complexity. Nature has given us SO much. If we do not conserve, we lose these precious privileges to exploitation and abuse of resources. The natural world is facing an increasing threat from unsustainable practices and the challenge is how to preserve and conserve nature in the process of achieving sustainable development. The state of nature has an impact on human survival, local and global economics, community life, human health and wellbeing. On this day, and every day, let us make a conscious effort to contribute to the local, national, and global efforts in conserving nature and the benefits they provide for present and future generations.

(SOURCE: <https://keepincalendar.com/July28/World%20Nature%20Conservation%20Day/668>)



“Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.” — Mahatma Gandhi



Connecting to Society

The Blue Antelope, *Hippotragus leucophaeus* (Blue Buck) – Mick D’Alton

The name, Blue Antelope and not Blue Buck, in Afrikaans *Bloubok*, is today considered to be the more appropriate name to be used in writing about this species, due to the confusion caused by the blue duiker, which is colloquially known as *bloubok* or blue buck. This antelope was a close relative of today’s Roan Antelope. The Blue Antelope was a specialist grazer and a synthesis of the historical distribution by Kerley *et al* (2009) shows the area occupied by the species comprised grassy fynbos/renosterveld habitats in the form of ‘Overberg Coastal Renosterveld’ and some ‘Genadendal Grassy Fynbos’ (after Cowling and Heijns 2001). This encompasses the rough triangle formed between the Bot River in the west, Swellendam in the east and Bredasdorp in the south, with a corridor reaching out to a smaller area on the Agulhas Plain between Arniston and the Southern Tip. The population modelling by



Kerley *et al* (2009) revealed that as few as 370 individuals remained in this area by the sixteen hundreds. However archaeological and paleontological information in Klein (1974) and Plug and Badenhorst (2001) reveal that in pre-historical times these antelope had a much wider distribution and occurred along the coastal strip from Saldanha Bay to the Port Elizabeth area. The reduction in the blue antelope distribution and population over the millennia is thought to coincide with the growth of pastoralism and the introduction of domestic stock about, 2,000 years ago and may reflect competition with these introduced grazers. By the time that observations of wild animals were recorded, they were already restricted to the area in the Overberg described above.

Although hunting and competition for grazing would have had an effect on their numbers (the literature contains very few instances of blue antelope hunted), they were already trapped in the extinction process. The Blue Antelope was extinct by 1800. The Palaeo-Agulhas Plain, which stretched for up to 100 km beyond the present shoreline, was exposed to a greater or lesser extent for roughly 80% of the past 300,000 years. It is likely to have been a mosaic of fynbos, grassland and thicket vegetation that was populated by many grazing species during those times. It is not inconceivable that some of those early roan antelope were trapped on the Agulhas Plain between the rising sea and the Cape Fold Mountains for the long periods of high sea levels. The different habitat and climate that they would have had to adapt to could have caused the evolution of these isolated animals into the blue antelope. Unfortunately their dependency on grasslands seems to have led to their extinction. The Blue Antelope was described as a large bluish-grey animal with black and strongly ringed horns that were more or less intermediate between those of the roan and the sable; no manes on neck or throat and no contrasting black-and-white pattern on the head as in the roan and sable. A measurement of 1.8 m from head to tail was given by OF Mentzel (circa 1740) indicating a large animal with a live body weight of possibly 250kg plus. (SOURCE: SKEAD, C.J. *Historical incidence of the larger land mammals in the broader Western and Northern Cape*. 2nd ed.)

Large mammals of the Palaeo-Agulhas Plain

A recent study explored the terrestrial mammal community assemblages of a now drowned Pleistocene ecosystem, the Palaeo-Agulhas Plain. The results provided insights on how large mammals survived extreme climate change and it will also be useful in understanding how species adapt to climate change and human impacts. The evidence indicates that the now submerged continental shelf, the Palaeo-Agulhas Plain (PAP), formed a novel ecosystem during periods of low sea level. This landscape provided nutrient-rich forage and habitats to a variety of large mammals. This is in contrast to the modern faunal assemblage found in the present-day Cape Floristic Region, which is dominated by landscapes with nutrient-poor soils and unpalatable plants. Archaeological and paleontological records for the region were used to reconstruct past large mammal communities. Modern knowledge of ecosystems and ecosystem processes helped the understanding of how systems functioned in the past. Species communities were reconstructed for the PAP of the last 300 ka and investigate potential gaps in the record using Hutchinson's weight ratio theory. The results were compared to modern occurrences of mammals on the Cape South and West Coasts and the Serengeti (a comparable migratory system) using general linear models. Both sea-level and sampling effort influenced species richness in both the South and West coast regions during the last seven marine isotope stages. In the South coast a decrease in species richness during intermediate sea levels was observed which indicates patterns of use by early humans and habitat availability. Large mammals showed an extraordinary resilience to extreme habitat loss and survived as refugee species during high sea levels and low habitat availability. However the combination of habitat loss and modern human weapons were the cause of severe extinction rates during the last 400 years. (AUTHORS: Jan A. Venter, Christopher F. Brooke, Curtis W. Marean, Hervé Fritz, Charles W. Helm. SOURCE: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/quaternary-science-reviews/vol/235/suppl/C>)

July in Khoe, //gai/ab, means “make fire, the cold is getting worse”



The Larks of the Agulhas Plain – Wim de Klerk

Identifying the larks of the Agulhas Plain might seem like a daunting challenge. The suggestion is to buy the Roberts App. Find the larks that could occur here by looking at each one's distribution map. Then study each one's call until it becomes familiar. Drive out at first light on a windless day and find a gravel road with fallow lands, ploughed fields or harvested lands next to the road. Then stop, and listen. Wait at least 10 minutes as birds will only start calling after a few minutes of quiet. Once you recognise a call, investigate with binoculars. During the 10 years of the Agulhas Plain Birding Project there were more than 120 sightings of **Red-capped** (*Calandrella cinerea*, Rooikoplewerik) and **Large-billed larks** (*Galerida magnirostris*, Dikbeklewerik) respectively, by far the most common species. The first with its red cap and shoulder patch and the latter noticeable by its thick bill with yellow base, heavily streaked breast and only when alerted shows a crest. Study until you are confident with them. The **Agulhas Long-billed Lark** (*Certhilauda brevirostris*, Overberglangbeklewerik) is more likely to be found among some low-growing fynbos but can be found on cultivated fields. Its call is slightly different from that on the app, but must have a rising crescendo followed by a decrescendo. Now look for the slightly larger size bird with decurved and rather long bill. It might be found on a road-side fence in the early morning sun. Only 77 sightings were recorded during the project, so less common than above two. The Cape Clapper Lark (Agulhas subspecies) is easier to find during breeding season from October to January. 57 sightings were recorded during the project. Find a fynbos area with a height of 5m and higher. Listen for the clapping as it ascends and then, give an ascending call as it drops down, often with an initial descending portion. In winter, a **Cape Clapper Lark** (*Mirafrapa apiata*, Kaapse klappertjie) disturbed, will fly a short distance and then classically drop down behind a shrub, never to show itself again! Both **Spike-heeled Lark** and Karoo Lark have been reported in the Plain before, but it is thought that this was mis-identified Cape Longclaw (juvenile) and Red-capped Lark (Juvenile) which can be very confusing.



A tale of parents teaching their young a thing or two.... – Steve Peck

About three months ago, while walking by the chicken coups to check up on some very young little baby chickens, entering the open doors (which are left open during the day to allow the other chickens to range free) something was found hanging from the roof netting..... it was an adult African Goshawk! It had obviously flown in to take a good look at the little ones, but fortunately mum had them safely tucked away. The bird was unhooked from the netting and set free. Imagine the surprise about six weeks later, the day after a juvenile African Goshawk was photographed in the garden, to find him also hanging inside the chicken coup! He took a bit of getting out, but eventually he was free. One can only assume his parent must have whispered in his ear where to find an easy meal!



The Southern Tip under lockdown 3

At the end of June Cape Agulhas reported 51 positive virus cases of which 29 recovered and only two deaths. L'Agulhas village, unfortunately, reported two positive cases in the last week of June. The Agulhas National Park is not open for visitors yet while general patrolling and maintenance continue. SANParks reported recently that up to now no staff member tested positive in any of the national parks except one case at Head-office.



Protocol compliancy in place



The Agulhas National Park's Climate Change Programme

Following from the May and June eBulletins, the purpose of the Climate Change programme is to document extreme weather events and changes in average climatic conditions and to document and predict the impacts of these changes on park operations, biodiversity and ecosystem processes (e.g. fire frequency and wetland dynamics). To achieve the purpose, the following actions will be implemented: The status of the changing climate in the park will be monitored by analysing weather station data, but also recording related observations (e.g. effects of high or low rainfall or temperatures). These anecdotes are important to archive along with the daily readings to assist in interpreting and updating assessments of how the climate has been changing. Assessments of change will be updated roughly every five years. The current and projected impact of observed changes will be considered in terms of biodiversity, partner stakeholders, socio-economic opportunities, park infrastructure and cultural heritage and will be (1) communicated between SANParks and the public around climate change and responsible lifestyles and (2) assessment of park-specific climate change vulnerabilities, which will be reviewed, assessed and updated under the plan. An Adaptation Response Plan based on the vulnerability assessment will also be developed and implemented. To be continued. (SOURCE: *Agulhas National Park Management Plan, Draft 2020 – 2029*)

Shipwrecks in the bay west of Cape Agulhas during July – Jimmy Herbert

On July 17, 1836 the **Doncaster**, a British barque of 235 tons en route from Mauritius to London struck the *Drie Branders* 2km out from Ratel River and was dashed to pieces. Nobody survived, and over time limbs and body parts, wearing torn clothing of the 29th, 87th and 99th Regiments and Royal Artillery and Engineers, washed out. Some reached shore after fourteen to twenty days underwater. A total of thirty-five males and eighteen female bodies, with five children, were properly interred - nearly all naked and unrecognisably mutilated. (Cape of Good Hope Govern. Gazette, 5/08, 2/09/1836; Grahamstown Journal, 18/08/1836; Lloyds Register of Shipping, 1836-37; SA Commercial Advertiser, 27/08/1836)



The forgotten Ratel River wreck – Jimmy Herbert

The word 'forgotten' expresses the fact that something that was known has faded from memory as 'out-of-sight out-of-mind' and results in the event eventually even disappearing from folklore. The Dutch and the British kept meticulous records of all significant occurrences. Locals, in turn, kept history 'alive' through tales, myths and oral transmission. A shipwreck is a catastrophic event that sticks in the memory of those affected for a lifetime. At the time of the calamity, the wreck site, especially those that sank on the reefs along our coastline, is known to many. All those involved in the rescue, local farmers, inhabitants, officials, salvors and more who assisted survivors and even participated in salvage work, soon knew the position of the loss. Yet, over time, this knowledge also fades away. The forgotten Ratel River wreck is one of the best examples of a shipwreck on our coast of which the position was known, forgotten and rediscovered in 1871, forgotten, and again rediscovered in the 2000s. From beaching, settling and sinking into the sand, to the ship now finding itself some distance from the water today, is remarkably a well-preserved wooden shipwreck that lies between the dunes - also having dunes between her and the sea. Comparing only 15 years of satellite images taken of the same position, the land gain is visible. From lying buried under sand below the high water mark (2004), she now finds herself (although at the same spot) lying behind dunes inland (2019). The wreck was documented in 2008 and 2009, but the question of what ship it was, remained. The Ratel River wreck was at best a small ship with a length of 20m and width of 8m. On examining the historical and archaeological records, pretty much all the losses are accounted for. We virtually have a wreck site that fits each of the 23 odd vessels lost in the area; all accept the 440ton **Duchess of Buccleugh** (1843). This British ship was beached and did not sink on the reefs. Add to that the **Duchess of Buccleugh's** size, and the fact that divers found further signs of sections of a small ship some 10 to 20m seaward of the ship's wooden section. They also found a small stove and clay bricks, four short iron cannon, a copper penny (too corroded to identify a date) and a silver Portrait Dollar of the 1820s - all British. To add to our data, we need the report of M. Neethling (1871) housed in the Cape Archive (closed for the year). So, although the jury is still out, for the meantime, we can state that the FORGOTTEN RATEL RIVER WRECK is in all probability that of the **Duchess of Buccleugh** (1843).

