

AgulhasNPark eBulletin

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Valuing Water

www.sanparks.org



World Water Day 2021

"Kinders moet nie in die water mors nie, die oumense wil dit drink" goes a well-known song in Afrikaans. Children should not play with water, the old people want to drink it; the same applies to adults. Every year World Water Day is celebrated on March 22. It is an annual United Nations observance day that highlights the importance of freshwater and seeks to focus on the global water crisis. Water is the natural resource and the main constituent of Planet Earth and one of the necessities for every living being on this planet. The day is used to advocate for the sustainable management of freshwater resources. This year the focus is on the theme **Valuing Water** to include the environmental and socio-cultural value placed on water resources and is about what water means to people, its true value and how this essential life resource can be protected. It is widely used for both domestic and industrial uses such as drinking, washing, cooking, etc. Earth is also known as a blue planet because of the vastness of water presence. There are various sources of water such as wells, rivers, lakes, oceans, big dams, and streams but only 1 to 2 % water is suitable for human use. (SOURCE: <https://www.worldwaterday.org/>)



Waterscapes: the natural wonder of the Agulhas Plain – Heather D'Alton, Nuwejaars Special Management Area (SMA)

You depend on water – it is the basis of life. Because of the unique setting of the Nuwejaars SMA, we depend on an intricate water network. We do not just turn on a tap. We connect with a vast water system that must function fully – much of it underground, **which eventually feeds the aquifer from which the Southern Tip villages tap their water.** Because our waterscapes are at the heart of our existence, we are highlighting these natural wonders of the Agulhas Plain. It is a tribute to our corner of earth in the Overberg – and the life-giving systems you will find here.

The Nuwejaars River: the artery of our waterscapes



The Nuwejaars River connects the intricate Nuwejaars wetland ecosystem and there are a host of reasons that this river is so important. Driving towards Elim on the Struisbaai-Elim road you will catch glimpses of the Nuwejaars on your right. The Nuwejaars River connects Waskraalvlei (where the Nuwejaars Wetlands SMA hippos live) to the birding hotspot, Voëlvlei, and from here it connects up to Soetendalsvlei (the second largest lacustrine wetland in the country). The wetlands feed the river for most of the year and during times of flood, the river feeds the wetlands which can absorb the excess water. These waters support immense biodiversity. That is why the region is such a birder's paradise - 265 bird species in the Agulhas Plain.

The surrounds are covered by endemic natural fynbos such as the *Protea pudens* and *Erica regia*. The river is also home to the Nuwejaars Redfin Minnow – a tiny indigenous fish that stands on the brink of extinction. There are five main tributaries to the Nuwejaars. They start on the slopes of the Bredasdorp Mountains, the Koueberge, the hills above the town of Elim and the Soetany's Mountains. It is a 55km stretch from the start of the river to the De Mond Estuary, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. The Nuwejaars flows into Soetendalsvlei, Africa's southernmost lake, to become the Heuningnes River which flows into the De Mond Estuary. Locally the people say the name, Nuwejaars, comes from the fact that the Nuwejaars stops flowing at the beginning of the new year.

Soetendalsvlei

Soetendalsvlei is the focus point of the waterscapes in the Agulhas Plain – connected to the Waskraalvlei, and other vleis like Voëlvlei, in this intricate water system, through the Nuwejaars River. Soetendalsvlei is an important waterscapes-feature for many reasons. The vlei is a paradise for birders. It is home to around 230 bird species and is a vital breeding and feeding ground for freshwater fish species, like the **Nuwejaars Redfin Minnow** (*Pseudobarbus* sp. 'burchelli' Heuningnes') and **Cape Galaxias** (*Galaxias zebratus*). A range of endangered frogs and toads, like the **Micro Frog** (*Microbatrachelia capensis*) and the **Cape Platanna** (*Xenopus gilli*), are found in the vlei. The drought of the last five to six years has affected Soetendalsvlei – as well as the vleis and wetlands that connect to it. It filled up with the good 2020 rain season, but was at its lowest since 1970.

Fish species like the indigenous Flathead Mullet (*Mugil cephalus*) can survive the drought, as they come together in estuaries (like the De Mond catchment) and even though they are a freshwater species, they spawn in the sea (coastal surface water), before heading back into the freshwater. That means they can repopulate the rivers, vleis and wetlands when the drought is broken. Many small fish species like the Nuwejaars Redfin Minnow are critically endangered and are impacted negatively by droughts. They can however survive in the pools in the many tributaries to the Nuwejaars River. These pools are often fed by underwater arteries and can thus retain their water during the drought. The Palmiet vegetation along the banks of these rivers also provides them with the ideal environment to survive.



Nuwejaars SMA



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Pinterest



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A wonderful wetlands birding morning – Wim De Klerk

At least once a year, the western shores of the Soetendalsvlei are opened up to the public on Wetlands Birding day. We followed the Nuwejaars River on its left bank towards Soetendalsvlei. African Darter, Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis and Reed Cormorant flew by as Levallant's Cisticola sang in the early morning. Large-billed Lark, Kittlitz's Plover and Cape Longclaw performed and we heard our first wader, a Common Greenshank. Then, the first highlight as a Black Harrier hovered over the moist wetland! A Pied Kingfisher hovered, dived into the water at amazing speed, but unfortunately had no success. The relatively quiet morning came to life when we reached the shores of Soetendalsvlei. We walked closer for a better view and suddenly it was just Waders everywhere. Black-winged Stilt, Little Stint, Ruff, Common Ringed Plover all fed feverishly in front of us as if we did not exist. Cape Shoveler, Yellow-billed Duck and Little Grebe swam about lazily while Whiskered Tern flew over the water, patrolling the vlei. There are many juveniles complaining to be fed by their mothers, so clearly this was a good breeding year. An African Snipe briefly shows and then disappears behind a reed-covered island. Walking back a Black-winged Kite was noticed. Reaching another vlei area and two Great White Pelicans dominated the scene, but in the shallow water were 31 Caspian Tern. About 20 of these are juveniles, another indication that it was a wonderful breeding year! This is indeed special as Caspian Tern are still on the Red Data List. Just before we left, a strange gull landed gracefully next to the Terns – Grey-headed Gull. On the way back an African Marsh-harrier, Grey-backed Cisticola and White-throated Swallow were spotted.

Birders walking to the Soutbosch pan were also not disappointed by all the birds feeding in and on the shores of the pan.



D. Stegmann



W. De Klerk



L. Wessels



W. Wolhuter



W. De Klerk

The 60 million year old tale: our Nuwejaars dragonfly pursuit

Around 60 million years ago, something amazing happened in the Cape: dragonflies started making themselves at home in our fynbos and wetlands. In the lifespan of dragonfly species, this is a recent occurrence, given that many of these species are about 300 million years old. In the Nuwejaars wetlands, dragonflies play the crucial role they are supposed to play – catching and eating pesky mosquitos, doing their part to keep these and other insect numbers in check. Dragonflies can only thrive where wetlands and waterscapes support them. Wetlands should ideally be healthy, or at least be resilient, to provide a sanctuary for dragonflies. Bear in mind that dragonflies spend up to two years underwater in larval state (some even longer) and during this time, are likely to eat tadpoles and even small fish. Healthy waters therefore ensure their survival from a young age. That is why dragonflies and damselflies (and other sensitive species) are considered an indicator species for good water quality. In January 2021, dragonfly and damselfly expert, Corrie du Toit, visited some of the wetlands of the Nuwejaars – in particular those wetlands to be expanded and rehabilitated in a project supported by WWF South Africa. During the dragonfly and damselfly pursuit, the team found 15 species, 11 of which were first-time records in our district. Read more about these new dragonfly species found at <https://nuwejaars.com/the-60-million-year-old-tale-our-nuwejaars-dragonfly-pursuit/>. Picture: Tropical Blue-tail (Hemelstertjie, *Ischnura senegalensis*)



Corrie Du Toit

2021 Environmental calendar days

March

Energy

- 3 World Wildlife day ¹⁵
- 8 Int Women day ⁵
- 15-22 National Water week ⁶
- 18 World Recycling day
- 21 International day of Forests
- 21 Human Rights day
- 23 World Meteorological day ¹³
- 27 Earth Hour ¹³

(SOURCE: www.wessa.org.za)

The sustainable development goals are **Gender equality**, **Clean water and sanitation**, **Climate action** and **Life on Land**.



Striped Lesser-Thicktailed Scorpion (*Uroplectes lineatus*) – Sharon Brink

We came upon this most interesting sighting in our garden the other day:

A Striped Lesser-Thicktailed Scorpion with babies. They are endemic to the Western Cape and occur from the Cedarberg to St Francis in the Eastern Cape. They are mildly venomous. Scorpions give birth to live young and the babies clamber onto their mother's back and remain with her for about 10 to 20 days, until their exoskeletons harden. *Uroplectes* is a genus of scorpions in the family *Buthidae*. They are known commonly as the Lesser Thicktailed Scorpions. There are about 40 species distributed in the Afrotropical realm. They are most diverse in South Africa. These scorpions are generally about 3 to 6cm long but a few are smaller, such as *U. ansiedippenaarae*, which is less than 2cm in length. They are variable in colour from bright yellows to muted greens. They occur in many types of habitat, from mountain forests to deserts. They live under rocks and in trees, and are sometimes seen invading houses.

(SOURCE: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uroplectes)



March in Khoe, *!hoa#gais*, means turned ears or hyraxes are giving birth

1849



Cape Agulhas Lighthouse: the light was officially lit on March 1, 1849; 172 years later still lighting up the Southernmost Tip of Africa. Not open to the public yet.



Water as symbol of life and regeneration

Water metaphors are an accepted and universal aspect of human communication and in Southern Africa our natural response to water, or the lack of water, is ingrained. Even the metaphorical meaning of water is strongly driven by the centrality of water in our concept of life, living and communality. In everyday language we use metaphors unconsciously to convey abstract ideas. The following expressions stem from the metaphor "water is knowledge/information": she is a *fountain* of wisdom, he is a *well* of information, children are sponges, *soaking* up knowledge, I'm *drowning* in facts, my inspiration has *dried up*. Authors use metaphors and images consciously and literature can have a central role in making visible the importance of water issues to South African readers. Writers are called upon to consider human responses and responsibility towards our natural world (ecological awareness, environmental sustainability and communal responsibility).

Two South African authors, Bessie Head and Karen Jayes, use the centrality of water to bring to the foreground matters of vital importance to their communities. The novels by Head and Jayes transport the reader directly to contemporary concerns through the centrality and power of the symbol of water as life.

In Bessie Head's novel "When rain clouds gather", knowledge is associated with both the sun and the rain. She links knowledge and life through an image of water with the question: "who will pour out knowledge like rain?". Underground rivers which persist when the land appears to be arid are compared with the "rivers inside" – the inner reserves of strength to be found among the ordinary members of the community. Head uses water or rain as a signifier, not only for the reality of the psychical world, but for how the personal and social world is perceived. A character's energy is described as "continuous flow of activity like a wave". The image of a river flowing along is also used to explain who changes work in a community.

Life in a time of water scarcity is the setting for the novel, "For the mercy of water" by Karen Jayes. The novel takes the real and imminent threat of the global water crisis and the political, humanitarian and ecological ramifications of such a crisis as its premise. Water is used as the central issue to point out serious concerns with our society, but it is also a symbol of hope and healing. Throughout the trauma of the story, water is offered as a symbol of healing, water is linked to life and blood, to new beginnings and hope.

This article highlights the ways in which literary uses of water (as metaphor or theme) might bring about fresh approaches to interconnecting social and cultural issues. The focus on water, both as itself and as symbol for life and community, is a hearkening to live responsibly towards others and the world around us.

(A summary of an article by Beyers, M. Water as symbol of life and regeneration in works by B Head and K Jayes, *South African Journal of Cultural History* (SAJCH), 34 (1), 2000, pp 114-131 by Madine Swart)



The Water Snake as the cause of rain and water

Evidence indicates that the Water Snake was regarded as a symbol for water and therefore as a particularly potent phenomenon. A dualistic nature was attributed to it, which is presently more pronounced among the /Xam than among the Khoekhoen, the latter tending to emphasise its negative qualities. The Griqua and /Xam believe that the Water Snake causes the rain which accompanies him when he travels through the air; one woman added that the Water Snake can cause the rain to fall when water is scarce. According to some /Xam and Khoekhoe informants in South Africa, the Water Snake is also the cause of water in a water source. It controls the water level, allowing the water to 'grow' or dry up; the Snake accomplishes this through blocking the opening by sitting on it. The verbs 'to pull back', 'to let grow', 'to well up' are used to describe these actions. According to a !Gimitnu woman of Namibia only Turus can control the water level. A /Xam woman added that when, in the past, the Water Snake 'blocked' a fountain, the people requested the Snake to yield water which it then did. A Griqua informant and a woman from the /Xam area called the Water Snake "the boss of the water". These views are in agreement with the belief that the killing of a Water Snake will cause a water source to dry up. The concept of the Water Snake as provider of rain and ground water is emphasised in the custom of the /Xam in the past of asking the Water Snake for rain or "working with the Water Snake" to obtain rain. A few /Xam informants referred to the former role of doctors in approaching the Water animals in order to obtain rain. However, the concept of the Water Snake as the provider of rain/water is unknown to most Nama and River Khoekhoen. The Nama and River Khoekhoen believe that the River Snake knows beforehand when the river will come down in flood and swims towards the approaching waters, to swim down with it or ahead of it. (FROM: HOFF, Ansie. The Water Snake of the Khoekhoen and /Xam. (*The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, Vol. 52, No. 165 (Jun., 1997), pp. 21-37.)

Sketch of the Water snake by an Augrabies artist

