

The *Astroloba* Rubric

Issue highlights

- Governance and finance
- Highlights of the past three months
- A glimpse at our plans for 2024-25
- Member articles
- Conservancy project
- Getting involved



From the Conservancy Office

The running of the Conservancy involves many routine tasks, ranging from the generic—like tax compliance—to more specialized tasks such as planning for the conservancy's environmental management system and organizing educational landowner days. However, the *strategic* focus of the last few months has been on strengthening the governance of the Conservancy, and its financial sustainability. These two matters are indeed substantially interrelated: as most of you know, WWF South Africa has been our primary project funder of the last number of years.

WWF SA invested money into building the Conservancy's capacity for environmental management and projects, not least of which by contributing funding for a full-time conservancy manager, first Carina Becker-Du Toit, and now me. In business investments, the investor expects to contribute an initial amount, and then over time reap the financial benefits of a return on that investment. Similarly, by the time that WWF SA's substantial investment comes to an end in mid 2025, the Conservancy will be expected to stand largely on its own feet—a well-

functioning, sustainable Conservancy improving the environmental management of our local landscape would therefore in itself be the "return on investment" that WWF had hoped for!

Two important implications arise: 1) That the Conservancy's efforts at securing additional self-funding should be continued and strengthened and 2) That the Conservancy itself will decide on its future milestones, outcomes and activities. The membership is the Conservancy, so your active participation and contribution remains vital.

Conservation Greetings
Jacques

Membership figures

Corporate Sponsor:

1

Landowner Members:

30

Friends of the Conservancy:

4

Announcement: Corporate Sponsorship

We are pleased to announce our first corporate sponsorship for 2024/25!

Afrimat (represented locally by Cape Lime (Pty) Ltd) has generously agreed to contribute funding towards the Conservancy's operations and environmental projects.

A big thank you for supporting sustainability in our beautiful region.



"Afrimat operates in an industry (opencast mining) that has a significant impact on the environment. The group is therefore committed to the continuous improvement of its operations by using its resources responsibly with the aim of reducing its environmental impact."

<https://www.afrimat.co.za/sustainability/>



Profile: new Conservancy Committee member

JP Auret

J.P. Auret is a qualified Diesel Mechanic, Precision Farming specialist and currently an Agricultural contractor.

His vision for the Conservancy is to share information with the public about nature and encouraging living in harmony with our diverse environment.

His aim is to share knowledge about conservation agriculture and trial-ling it in our environment.

Wild bees of the Noree valley

Alison Gilson, Committee Member from Tierhoek Organic Farm has kindly shared news on an ongoing bee research project.

Exciting news for the Conservancy has been the presence of Ujubee founder and bee expert Jenny Cullinan. As a guest of Tierhoek Organic Farm she has been spending 5 days, every few months, researching the wild bees in the Noree Valley. The aim of Ujubee is to document the Cape Honeybee (*Apis mellifera capensis*) and other wild bees to assess their contribution to the health of biodiversity in the fauna and flora of the Cape. We are in a unique situation where 80% of our bees are still wild, unlike Europe where most of the bees are hived. With bees pollinating about 85% of fynbos, they play a vital role in the Cape's floral kingdom, and it is crucial that we understand the threats facing these pollinators in their ecosystem. Jenny chose to study the bees at Tierhoek Organic Farm, as it is a pristine farming environment, and she is able to assess how the Cape honeybee is thriving. She has found several ancient bee colonies, tucked up in the rockfaces of the valley, and has taken some stunning photographs of several wild bees in the area. She is currently working with a documentary film crew who are putting together material to release a documentary on the wild bees of the Cape. Ujubee is a self-funded, independent group of researchers who are generous in sharing their knowledge with conservation organisations, allowing them to better understand the important role the bees play in our environment. For information go to Ujubee | A blog on the conservation of bees <https://ujubee.com>



BioBlitz & iNaturalist Training

On 25 May 2024, Roam Rooiberg became a hub for biodiversity as it hosted a BioBlitz event coupled with an iNaturalist training session, led by botanist Steven Molteno.

Steven, with his extensive knowledge and infectious passion for botany, guided the group through the veld sharing fascinating insights into the unique species within the renosterveld.

The veld excursion was followed with an introduction to iNaturalist, a popular nature app that assists in identifying and documenting plants and wildlife. Participants, ranging from avid conservationists to

curious locals, were eager to learn how to use this tool effectively. Steven provided hands-on training, ensuring everyone was comfortable with the app.

The event empowered individuals to become citizen scientists in their own right and inspired participants to view their surroundings with a keener eye and a deeper appreciation.

“Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.” – Gary Snyder

<https://www.inaturalist.org/>



Informative article: the secretary bird

Cecil Mitileni, Committee Member and Conservation Manager of Graham Beck, has kindly shared his observations and facts about the secretary bird.

Introduction

Situated in the valley between Worcester and Robertson, lies a region that sustains the remaining Karoo and Renosterveld vegetation. This area, referred to as the Rooiberg Breede River Conservancy, serves as a habitat for a diverse array of bird species, many of which are exclusive to this location.

The 55,000 hectares of conserved land in the Rooiberg Breede River Conservancy provide a habitat for a diverse range of bird species. Among them is the endangered secretary bird, which has been observed in the area. The secretary bird, scientifically known as *Sagittarius serpentarius*, is a native bird of prey indigenous to Africa and is commonly found in the dry areas of South Africa, including the succulent karoo in the Western Cape. It is predominantly a ground-dwelling species, choosing to spend most of its time on land.

Diet and Unique Hunting Style

The Secretary bird is a meat-eating bird that consumes small mammals, lizards, snakes, and other reptiles. In the Succulent Karoo, it hunts species like the Cape cobra (*Naja nivea*), puff adders (*Bitis arietans*), and small rodents. The Secretary bird is recognized for its unique hunting technique, utilizing its strong legs and sharp talons to overpower its prey. In the Succulent Karoo, it frequently employs its lengthy legs to chase down small mammals, like hares and rodents, that come out of their underground homes.

Threats

The population of Secretary birds in the Western Cape is currently estimated to range between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals. Unfortunately, their numbers are decreasing due to a range of threats, including habitat loss, fragmentation, predation, poisoning, and conflicts between humans and wildlife.



Breeding Habitats

Secretary birds' nest in the Succulent Karoo from October to February, where they mate for life and the female lays 2-4 eggs in a nest constructed from twigs, grasses, and plant material. Both parents share the responsibilities of incubating the eggs and tending to the offspring.

Cultural Significance

The Secretary bird holds great significance in numerous African cultures, representing strength, courage, and bravery. Its robust physique, formidable talons, and assertive hunting techniques are widely revered and esteemed. In South Africa, the Secretary bird is prominently displayed on the nation's coat of arms, embodying resilience, courage, and strength.

Conservation Efforts

To safeguard Secretary birds in the Western Cape, it is imperative for multiple organizations and Government agencies to collaborate on initiatives such as habitat conservation and restoration, population monitoring, predator control, farmer education, and promoting sustainable agriculture.



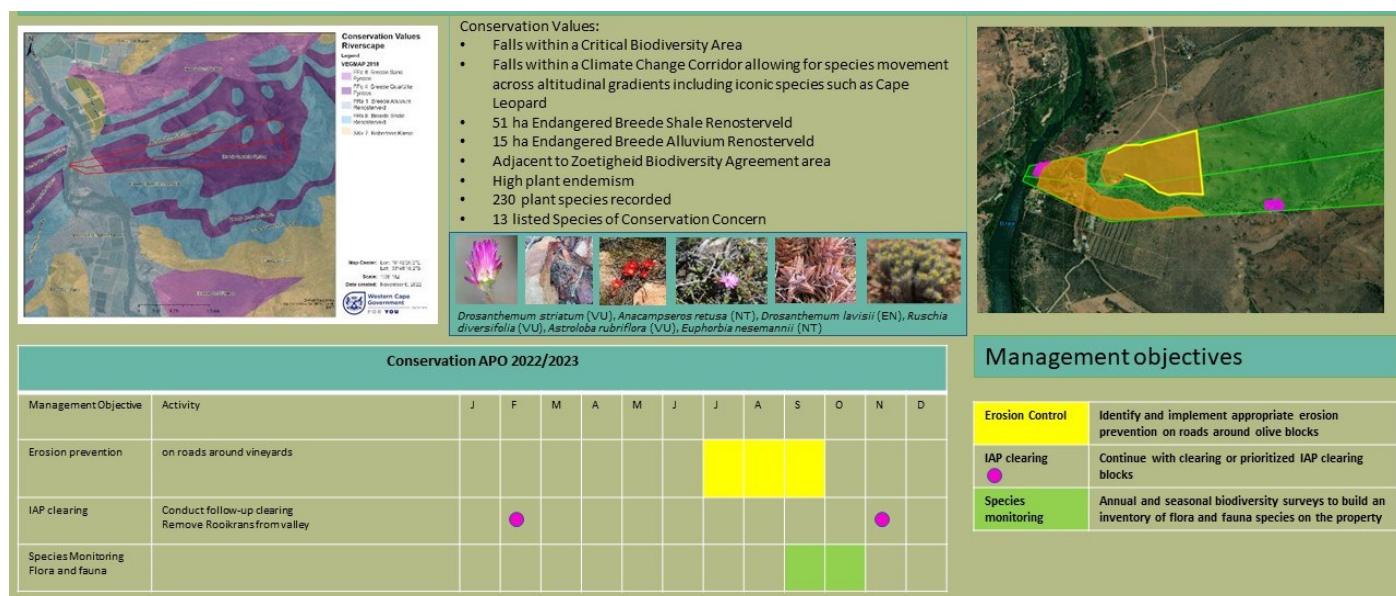
Progress report: Conservancy environmental management plan

In the previous issue, we reported on plans for an Environmental Management Plan for the Conservancy. Since the last issue, we have made progress in securing additional funding for a workshop facilitated by an expert in management plans and auditing systems to get landowner members' inputs, create a draft document for comment by the broader membership, and brief members about these tools and systems. We know from experience, however, that thick written volumes of technical jargon often sit unused on the shelf. Therefore, we need members to participate in the development of this tool so that we can create something relevant, pragmatic, and user-friendly—these systems will be designed to accommodate your annual schedule of farming and other economic activities. Most likely, it will take the form of

a “good management guidelines” document, supported by Annual Plans of Operation (APO) for each member. This would then allow Conservancy members to measure their environmental management successes or shortcomings by means of self-audits, supported by less frequent Conservancy Manager audits.

We want to use this opportunity to remind members that “failing” APO audits will not carry any sanction, but conversely, passing them will result in recognition to landowners who distinguish themselves through the exemplary management of natural resources and ecosystems under their control. An internal certification and labeling scheme is one possible avenue to facilitate that.

Important! We would like to see as many landowner members as possible at this event and participating in the process afterwards! You will be consulted to select the best possible date and venue.



Tentative upcoming educational and awareness event topics

The Conservancy Manager and Committee are constantly brainstorming potential educational and awareness day topics along with partners such as WWF. The topics are then evaluated for relevance, practical benefit, and financial feasibility.

Of course, members are also very welcome to submit their event ideas!

Keep an eye out for notifications by e-mail and the Conservancy WhatsApp group for scheduled upcoming events. If you are unsure whether you are receiving all notifications, confirm that we have your correct and up to

date contact details. Tentatively, here are the event topics under consideration for the 2024-2025 financial year:

- Making and using biochar
- Butterfly BioBlitz
- Archaeology (stone age artifacts)
- Paleontology (fossils)
- Birding Big Day (with Robertson Tourism)
- Snake awareness and safety

Send us your comments and suggestions for topics, guest speakers, and venues!

Upcoming event: practical soil erosion rehabilitation methods

Soil erosion is a significant threat to both natural ecosystems and agricultural resources. A highly sensitive soil structure coupled with sometimes erratic rainfall and historic overgrazing has made our region particularly vulnerable to erosion. We are planning a landowner event with expert input for later in July in cooperation with Cecil Mitileni, Conservation Manager of Graham Beck Family Estates.

Keep an eye out for announcements. Learn about methods such as ponding, gabions, and geotextiles. Bring your staff, implements, gloves, and snacks for a morning's hands-on interactive learning experience!



Get involved: just some of the many ways you can support our work

- Donate vegetable seeds and seedlings, compost, and garden implements for local farm school gardens to “sow the seed” of environmental education among our youth.
- Approach potential corporate sponsors for the Conservancy in your business and professional network.
- Alert the Conservancy Manager to any developing environmental threats you may come across.
- Volunteer labour and materials for improving our office and nursery area.
- Attend our educational events, and invite your guests to join us once-off for a small fee, or better yet join as Members



Conservancy project: threatened and endangered plant sensitivity mapping



Pictured on the left is Steven Molteno, a botanist by now well known to several Conservancy members, Friends of the Conservancy and guests. Steven has done extensive vegetation surveys in the Conservancy, and recently even facilitated a well-received training session on poaching-conscious iNaturalist use alongside a botanical BioBlitz. In the coming weeks to months, you may see Steven around the Conservancy. He will be mapping the rare and endangered plant wealth of the Conservancy in a systematic, phased approach. If you encounter Steven on his travels, do offer him all possible assistance and hospitality. His work will endow us with

a detailed, ground-truthed map of rare and threatened species in our landscape so that we can better plan for conservation and respond to threats in a pro-active, scientifically substantiated way! Kindly also assist us by introducing Steven to your non-member neighbours when requested.

On a related topic: always be vigilant when unknown individuals show an interest in succulent plants, whether through communications or apparent physical scouting for and removal of plant material—our area has not been left unaffected by the scourge of plant poaching. Call the SAPS, CapeNature, or the Conservancy Manager if you notice suspicious activity.

Rooiberg Breede River Conservancy

Visit us or get in touch!

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