

# MATOBO CONSERVATION SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER 71

OCTOBER 2010

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[www.matobo.org](http://www.matobo.org)

## 1 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Yes, it's that time of year again! Please show your support of not just the Society but also your committee by attending the AGM. We always welcome new members to the Committee, so be sure to put Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> November in your diary! Further details below.

## 2 – RHINO UPDATE

Two white rhino (one male and one female) were poached in Matobo NP in August. The female had a calf which seems to have survived the attack and has been seen with other white rhino since then. After so many years of secure protection within the Matopos, we are losing a steady trickle every year.

Rhino poaching has spiked dramatically since 2008, with 210 slaughtered so far this year, almost double the number slain in 2009, according to the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

Black-market demand for rhino horn continues to soar, particularly in China and Vietnam, due largely to the economic boom in Asia. Poachers sell the horns for medicinal and ornamental use at huge profits. South Africa and neighbouring Zimbabwe are responsible for 95% of the poaching, according to wildlife monitoring group Traffic.

At the same time rhino continue to be relocated from the Matopos to other National Parks. Fortunately the Matopos herd is still strong and the reproductive rate is still positive to support the relocations.

## 3 – POACHING

Many of our members will have seen the recent articles concerning the arrest of a highly sophisticated gang of poachers in South Africa. It is a very sad day indeed when so-called professionals (veterinarians and hunters) are found to be in the midst of the biggest poaching syndicate in South Africa. The reports allege that this same group is linked to the ongoing Zebra poaching in southern Zimbabwe – so we can only hope that the arrest will see a halt to poaching on both sides of the border.

## 4 – RAINFALL

Zimbabwe and the rest of SADC will have normal to above-normal rainfall for the 2 halves of the 2010/11 rainy season spanning from October to March next year, according to regional weather experts who also warned that the rains will be associated with heavy flooding in the Zambezi Valley area in Zimbabwe and the outbreak of malaria and implored authorities to be on high alert to deal with the situation – *Herald*.

This October has certainly seemed hotter than usual, so let's hope it's a precursor to good rains. And whilst we bake and wilt in the heat (with October 12<sup>th</sup> recorded as the hottest day ever in Bulawayo at 38.2c), the trees have burst out into thick fresh green foliage, some in full bloom. It's always incredible to see spring emerge with such vigour when the ground and air is still so dry. Along the granite ridges, the *Elephantorrhiza* is waving brilliant fresh green fronds; whilst the rest of the kopje is still dry and hard.

## 5 – MATOPOS DVD ON SALE

Members are reminded that the Matobo Hills World Heritage submission DVD is now available. Members wanting to acquire copies should contact the Secretary to place orders.

## 6 - NEXT EVENT

Date 28 November 2010  
Venue Granite Ridge  
Meet 8:15am to leave by 8:30am, Churchill Arms Hotel

Travel All vehicles

Details Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat!

We will be holding the Society Annual General Meeting in the morning, and then will enjoy the hospitality of Granite Ridge for the remainder of the day. Any members wanting to spend Saturday night at Granite Ridge are welcome to contact them directly (on [matopos@yoafrica.com](mailto:matopos@yoafrica.com)) and make arrangements at the following rates; self catering...US\$30.00 per person, and camping...US\$10.00 per person  
There is a swimming pool and we will do some walking!

## 7 – REPORT BACK

(With appreciation to Judy Ross)

15th August saw 30 people leave from the Churchill Arms for a combined MCS and Birdlife outing. Our destination was Mtshелеle dam in the Matopos. As MCS's usual intrepid leader was unable to co-ordinate the outing (due to business demanding him to be in Johannesburg that morning! Very rude of them!!) we were handed over to Craig Friend. There are two routes to this dam and depending on your nerve and vehicle's ability you chose which ever one suited you. On arrival we found there was water in the toilets which were spotless and after a brief stop we split up into 2 groups - one going towards the dam wall, the other walking down the river end. The walks although only about 1,5 km each way were taken at a birding pace (walk 20m, stop, binos up, much discussion, binos down, walk 10m, stop, binos up, etc., etc. - you get the picture; birding is a very slow walk). I mention this as with MCS outings we have a certain leader who says we are going on a short walk which is like about 10km and the pace is brisk to say the least! Those members who have difficulty with the brisk pace were much appreciative of our "birding" trek and much was learned by members of the group. The lunchtime final tally was 43 species seen with Green Pigeon and Pygmy Geese being the 'unusuals' for most members. There was much bantering between the two groups as to who saw what and whose count was greater - the non birders were a little aghast at this at first then joined in the fun realising we were pulling each others leg. A chat was then given by Celia Hubbard on the Black Eagles of Matopos. By this stage it was late in the afternoon and the group broke up to return home along some of the lesser known routes, several taking the back route to Toghwana Dam, others via Maleme and Circular drive. Another wonderful day shared by like minded people, and special appreciation to the "Tweeters" for sharing their roost with us.

## 8 – BUSH FIRES AGAIN

2010 must surely rank as the worst year on record for veld fires. At first the fires seemed to be kept at bay, but during late July and through August the country literally went up in smoke.

Norman Scott wrote, on 25 August; "The past week has been a mixed bag of adventure, starting off with a veldt fire that swept from the Hope Fountain area early on Monday morning. Being fanned by a strong wind it had by mid afternoon moved far to the west across the old Gwanda road and then across the Matopos road onto the farms of the Rhodes Estate south of the Tshabalala Game sanctuary. Far into the night the sky was lit up by the reflection of the flames on the pall of smoke that reached high up into the sky.

I was woken early on Tuesday morning with a request by a friend who wanted to go out to Gordon Park to look for an item of property that a visitor to the Park on the previous Sunday had inadvertently left behind. I hitched a lift, I must admit not so much to go out to the Park, as to see the results of the fire of the day before. The devastation was unbelievable. Thousands upon thousands of hectares had been reduced to black ash. A really hot burn. From the city limits to the Rhodes Estate Research Station had been burnt with a few fires still burning. Tshabalala Game Sanctuary had in the most part had been spared, so the animals had not suffered too badly. The Matopo Rock Motel had been burnt down the previous Thursday.

A week after Norman's report a further fire burnt along the Fort Usher Road, from Fort Usher to the National Park, burning through Steadfast Park and Sandy Spruit, and into the upper Mtshелеli valley near Imadzi.

The Herald reported on 8 September – “Zimbabwe has lost nearly 200 000 hectares of vegetation to veld fires over the past month, the Environmental Management Authority has said.” At that time the fires were still burning!

Your editor recently drove to Harare and witnessed much of the Somabula Flats going up in smoke – but the whole route there and back was largely burnt out. Flying south, one gets the true impact of the fires south of Bulawayo. From wing tip to wing tip the earth below was blackened by fire. The fire reported by Norman Scott, which many Bulawayo residents would have seen, stretches from east of the How Mine, through to Lonsdale farm in the east, from Bulawayo in the north right into the northern reaches of the park. An enormous area of ground. On the road, the area around Matopos Dam is like a war zone – with massive devastation. In some areas, the green shoots are coming through, and the leaves are pushing out fresh green shoots. The constant annual fires have turned some formerly wooded parts of the Matopos Recreational Park into grassy hillsides, and the great forests north of Bulawayo also show a marked deterioration from fire.

Years ago, before the commercial farmer went extinct, that species would do everything to protect its land. Today the so called occupied properties are largely derelict, with no grazing to keep the grass down, and certainly no bush management or any form of fire break. The land has no value, so why protect it? Consequently once a fire starts, there is no stopping it – it goes for miles and miles uninterrupted. And when in the past the local farming community would get together to fight veld fires, today we watch them burn. And as for the Environmental Agency and the Police – well say no more. The destruction of Zimbabwe’s environment by fire each year will rank as one of the most serious consequences of the land grab of the first part of this century – this and the rampant destruction of trees. It’s a very sad legacy for our country!

#### 9 – BOOK RAFFLE

We continue to sell tickets for our raffle and we have now exceeded our target – but demand still seems good so tickets will be on sale until the Annual General Meeting, at which time it will be drawn! So if you have not yet bought your tickets, it’s not too late. A reminder of the prizes - “Legacy on the Rocks” by Elspeth Parry (donated by Elspeth Parry) and “Albizia Southern Africa” by Martinus Steyn (donated by Brian Kalshoven).

#### 10– CALENDAR 2011

Your committee has a good list of potential outings, and we will let you know the programme for 2011 as soon as we have coordinated our activities with other societies. However, we hope to arrange an outing in January that will take advantage of the wet weather and the hopefully full steams and rivers!

(We will endeavour to keep to these dates, but reserve the right to make amendments)

#### 11 – CONTACT DETAILS

Please don’t forget to keep the Society updated on your contact details, especially your e-mail address!

Friends of members are always welcome to attend our quarterly outings.

The Society is always looking for new members – help us to attract new members to the MCS.

Members are invited to make submissions to our newsletter and / or website.

## 12 – MONUMENTS

With acknowledgment Herald; Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> August

The National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe is working towards the restoration of King Lobengula's capital – popularly known as Old Bulawayo – that was destroyed in a veld fire on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> August. The veld fire erupted about 5km from the site. Nothing was salvaged from the site, situated about 17 km from Bulawayo as the fire destroyed all the 8 beehive huts, including the King's palace. Also destroyed was the King's kraal, wagon shed, a house built for him by missionaries, and the palisade. A house built by the Khumalo's to perform traditional rituals was also not spared by the fire, as well as a stone laid by President Mugabe in 1993 to commission the reconstruction of the site. NMMZ director Godfrey Mahachi said Old Bulawayo was an important national heritage site and its reconstruction had to be done quickly.

## 13 – SUBSCRIPTIONS 2010

FAMILY / INDIVIDUAL	R 100
SPECIAL / PENSION	R 20
CORPORATE	R 500

These new subs were agreed at the AGM and were due by 31<sup>st</sup> July 2010.

## 14 – MATOBO HILLS CLASSIC

The annual Matobo Hills Classic MTB was postponed to 20 / 21 November 2010. The route this follows the old Tuli wagon Rd past how mine, and down to the Umzingwane river. Then up and past Fort Mtshabezi before finishing on Day one at Camp Dwala after about 55km's. On Day two the 70km route follows the now standard cross to cross route from Camp Dwala to Big Cave Camp.

## 15 – A BICYCLE RIDE

Elsewhere in this newsletter the destructive force of the annual veld fires is discussed. However, there is another major threat to the environment, and that is the wanton destruction of trees. During the long weekend in August, your Chairman rode 150km's through the hills on various rides, and never has he seen so much cutting of trees. Almost every valley he turned down had evidence of fresh cutting, and the sound of the axe on wood became more common than the call of doves. It was a sobering and disappointing ride.

There is some consolation – the scotch carts piled with timber no longer seem to ply the Old Gwanda Road, so perhaps that commercial trade has stopped. But the cutting within the hills for domestic use, from fires, to fences to walls, to roofs, is unrelenting. This perhaps is the challenge for the MCS – how do we provide an alternative?

## 16 – [www.MATOBO.ORG](http://www.MATOBO.ORG)

We trust you have visited our website! We recently gave the web-site a facelift, so be sure to log in and follow the progress of the Society. Please give us news, views and links to other sites

## 17 – IN MEMORIAM

Val Garget passed away in Australia on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2010 at the age of 87.

Whilst the first black eagle observations started in 1959, it was the involvement of Val Garget that saw this work grow into the most comprehensive study of any eagle species in the world. 2010 marked the 47<sup>th</sup> annual report on the Black eagle Survey of the Matobo Hills, and Val is well known for her incredible work contained in her book "The Black Eagle; A Study" published in 1990.

From a distance, as Val was living in Australia, she was a supporter of the establishment of the Matobo Conservation Society and gave encouragement in our early years.

All who knew this unassuming, gentle and dedicated amateur ornithologist will remember her with deep affection. Her spirit will live on in those majestic hills she loved so much

## 18 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Don't forget the AGM at Granite Ridge on Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> November at 10:00am. Hope to see you there!