



Monthly Newsletter

12/23



CONTACT: Main Office - 033 330 3036.

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Email custodians: custodian@freemewildlife.org

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Editorial

The spirit of 'Bah humbug'



'Tis the season to be jolly...' apparently. What you are likely to find at FreeMe Wildlife during December is the highest number of wildlife patients in care than at any time in the year, and a bunch of tired, frazzled, and generally grumpy staff members who look more like the Grinch than 'Santa's little helpers'

While we understand that our chosen vocation (that of wildlife rehabilitation) is a labour of love, paid in passion and good feels rather than in rands, December is a period that would try the patience of any (wildlife rehabilitation) saint.

It is the time when even more than the usual 'car-less, transport-less, help-less' people come across wildlife in need. (We are going to one day publish a paper on the correlation between wildlife rescues, hermits, orphans, and car ownership since an incredible number of people who rescue wildlife cases apparently don't own cars, have no family or friends that can help, and don't ever leave their homes to go anywhere). It is also the time of the year when it is the most difficult for us to 'step of out of the office' so to speak as there are dozens of hungry mouths to feed, cages to clean, new patients to admit, and pressure to fit vet appointments in at times when the vets are open and can see emergencies.

On the administrative side, many of our service providers are also closing for their annual holidays. The weeks leading up to office shutdowns are frantic as we try to think of all the food and veterinary supplies we will need to tide us over into the new year. Added to this, many of these service providers want accounts paid up early, giving our financial manager grey hairs as she must work out what will be left after having to spend a month's budget in 2 weeks instead of 4.

It is also the season of goodwill and giving, so from the staff at FreeMe Wildlife, the best gift we can get over the Christmas period is compassion and understanding. Be forgiving of the fact that staff may not always display Christmas cheer and understand that many of them may not get to spend any time with family or loved ones they are missing at this time of year.

For them Christmas morning will not begin with opening presents, but with opening doors and cages. Be aware that there are no 'silent nights' for the rehabilitators that work around the clock to feed and care for the baby animals, and that the 'jingle bells' they will be hearing is the gate intercom and telephone going incessantly. And, where you can, use your own mode of transport to bring wildlife through to the Centre. Even if it means you need to find a sleigh and reindeer somewhere to ask for a lift...





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Statistics for November:

ADMISSIONS

BIRDS	MAMMALS	RAPTORS	REPTILES
85	15	10	2

RELEASES

BIRDS	MAMMALS	RAPTORS	REPTILES
19	0	3	0

New Admissions

The summer months most certainly bring some different species in to the rehab as it is the time of the year that migrant species join the throng of common residents. Some of the not often seen bird species admitted during November included a Buff-spotted Flufftail (a shy, elusive species who's haunting 'whoooooo' can be heard throughout the night) which sadly did not survive being mauled by a cat, a Groundscraper Thrush, a Spotted Thick-knee (still recovering from a fractured leg) (1) a Blue Crane which did not survive its injuries, and a Cape Longclaw. Of course, there were the usual admissions of more common species such as Hadedas, various doves, weavers, robin-chats, thrush's, mousebirds, wagtails, bulbuls, egrets, geese, kingfishers, starlings, swifts, and sunbirds.

The number of bird admissions swell considerably during the summer months, and this is not just because of the migrant species. Many bird species are breeding at this time of year, and the increased activity puts adults at risk, and of course, nestlings and fledglings are always vulnerable to nest site disturbance and predation by domestic pets.

Spotted Eagle Owls (2) obviously had really good breeding season as many of these fledgling birds, now venturing out of natal territories, are encountering difficulties learning to navigate the wide world on their own. Out of the ten raptor admissions during November, eight were Spotted Eagle Owls (some adults, some juveniles). An overwhelming number of these were the victims of vehicle strikes, highlighting the fact that owls often hunt on the verges of roads where it is easy to see rodents running across the open spaces. Outcomes are so varied with vehicle strikes as some owls are fortunate enough to escape with mild concussions, while others sustain such horrific injuries they are often killed outright or die shortly after admission from their injuries.





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The remaining bird of prey admissions included a juvenile Black Sparrowhawk caught raiding a pigeon loft, and a juvenile Crowned Eagle (3) trapped while raiding a chicken coop. As with the young owls, all juvenile birds of prey find life very difficult once they have left the care of their parents. There is an 80 – 90% mortality rate in their first year of life. While the Black Sparrowhawk did not survive (it had a severely shattered hip) the Crowned Eagle is still in care, recovering from some mild injuries and gaining condition before it gets given a second go at independent survival.

In the mammal's department we had another admission of a suspected African Wildcat. We are still waiting for DNA results to come back for this cat, but if they do end up proving the cat to be a pure African Wildcat, this will make the third African Wildcat admitted within the past two months. These cats all come from different parts of the country, leading us to believe that the species may actually be increasing in number and distribution.

Added to this, two Large-spotted Genet (4) kits have joined the nursery of other young mammals in care, which includes several baby bats, a Thick-tailed Bushbaby (5) recovered in a wattle plantation, a tiny Banded Mongoose pup dug out of a burrow, seven little Striped Fieldmice, a Blesbuck Lamb kicked by a Zebra, and a Grey Duiker attacked by dogs. Some of the other mammal admissions were not so fortunate and a baby Warthog gored by an adult male succumbed to its injuries, a Grey Duiker caught in a fence died of capture myopathy, and a Vervet Monkey hit by a car did not survive that trauma.

While reptile admissions consisted only of two Hinge-backed Tortoises (6), the 50% expected survival rate in rehabilitation was clear as one of them is still in care, while the other died. Tortoises are not adapted to live south of the Tugela River. They thrive in hot, dry bushveld areas, and are not adapted to deal with areas that get cold or very wet. The Midlands is not ideal habitat for these reptiles, and at FreeMe Wildlife we are constantly tackling



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husbandry issues that result from constant damp. Tortoises are very prone to respiratory and fungal infections, as both these cases proved.

Both tortoises were dropped off (one at a vet, the other at the SPCA) after being picked up wandering around in the Pmb area. Both tortoises presented with severe respiratory infections, breathing difficulties, discharges from the eyes and nostrils, swollen limbs, and yellow diarrhoea. It seems that no matter how much public engagement and education we embark on, members of the public still insist on keeping tortoises as 'pets' to the severe detriment of these benign little reptiles.

Releases - *the best part!*

Bird releases in November included a whole bunch of Hadedas, Laughing Doves (7), Red-eyed Doves, Speckled Pigeons, Olive Thrush, Dark-capped Bulbuls, Fork-tailed Drongo, Familiar Chat, Streaky-headed Seedeater and Barn Swallow.

In the heavyweight category, a young Spotted Eagle Owl hit by a vehicle near Hilton College made a swift recovery and was released close to the college, an adult Female Jackal Buzzard (8) recovered from a broken wing was set free, and two Spotted Eagle Owls raised at FreeMe Wildlife were sent to Bosch Hoek estate as part of a soft release, including the installation of an owl box for them.

No mammals were released in November, but the Banded Mongoose pup was transferred to another rehabilitation facility that has others of the same species in care. This is important for a species that is gregarious by nature to have others of its kind to grow up with.

Added to this, the bat pups that came into care were transferred to members of the Bat Interest Group of KZN as these dedicated 'bat mothers' specialize in the round the clock care of baby bats. These tiny little mammals need feeding every 30 minutes round the clock when they are newborns.

The reptile's department was also very quiet with no reptile releases taking place in November.



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Outreach and Engagement



Shane Bennitt presented another wildlife talk, this time to the Grade 5's at Chelsea Secondary School. The kids made some beautiful posters following the talk, which clearly left a lasting impression on them.



Our Raptor Specialist presented her talk on bird of prey rehabilitation, 'Rise of the Phoenix', to the residents of Dunkirk Estate on the north coast.



Want to book a talk for 2024? Drop us an email on admin@freemewildlife.org

Projects and Research



Members of our team were fortunate enough to attend the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Bird of Prey Conference held in Hoedspruit. This conference brought researchers and other interested parties together from across Southern Africa, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. Sadly, the state of bird of prey populations across Southern Africa are in decline. In some areas, even what we would consider to be common species, such as Long-crested Eagles, are showing huge declines in number, with other species (such as White-backed Vultures) heading swiftly towards extinction.





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November Champions:

We would like to say thank you to everyone involved for the huge effort that went into the **Harvard House** Golf Day this year. This annual event is a lot of fun and raises much needed funds for FreeMe Wildlife.

Added to this, the **Ambers Bowling Club**, and **Ambers Bookworms** both raised funds for us, and **Mike Spain** kindly raised funds as part of his birthday celebrations. Thank you, Mike, for celebrating your birthday with us!

We also welcome two new Custodians to the family. **Amelia McKenzie** is our newest Junior Custodian, and the **Dargle Conservancy** our newest Corporate Custodian. A big thank you to them for becoming part of the heart that drives our organization.



Have you seen all the goodies we have available for Christmas? Howick residents are welcome to pop across to the Centre to purchase owl, bat, bird, and bee boxes as we have these in stock.

Or visit our online shop:
<https://freemewildlife.org/shop/>

