



FreeMe

FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre

RESCUE • REHABILITATE • RELEASE



e-Zine

August 2009

Meet the team!



Back, from left: morning receptionist Jenni McLean, support staff Jabu Ncube and Claudius Sibande; front left afternoon receptionist Tariro Kapenzi and right senior animal manager Nicci Wright

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IN SEARCH OF THE PANGOLIN... CONTINUED

Story by Hilary Millward
Photo by Sharon Schmid

In the last issue of the FreeMe magazine I referred to a book by Satyajit Das titled In Search of the Pangolin: an inspirational account of one man's search for the elusive pangolin that fuelled his commitment to strive to protect the world's wild places and its creatures. Even after many years, he never saw his pangolin and the same may be said of

most people, including many who work in nature conservation. The volunteers at FreeMe are no different, so imagine my surprise on coming to work one afternoon and being told by a beaming Nicci that we had ... a pangolin! What a privilege to be able to peep into the stable and see him/her curled into a very large ball pretending to be invisible!

As their diet consists of ants and termites, they are not easy to keep in captivity. Our pangolin, a fully grown adult, was in good health and, after two days at FreeMe, was released in the Sanwild reserve near Hoedspruit. In those two days he/she kept Claudius and Jabu very busy prowling the ridge looking for termite nests.

Despite their scaly appearance, pangolins are mammals; they are not related to the armadillos of the Americas. Shy and nocturnal, they are rarely seen, although they inhabit much of South Africa. Despite their strange appearance they are extremely fast moving and generally run on their back legs, with their smaller, weaker forelegs often not touching the ground. This is confirmed by one of the few lucky people to have seen one in the wild. Sharon, our finance director, saw one in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, running across the road. Interestingly, this occurred during the day. She says that besides being thrilled to see it, she formed the impression that it was not that bright. Apparently it found a small bush that it was just able to fit its head under and stood there ostrich like in its belief that if it couldn't see her, she couldn't see it!

Or maybe it was just relying on the excellent defences that it has against predators such as curling into an armour plated ball, letting off a foul smelling scent and having razor sharp scales that can inflict serious injury. The few predators that pangolins do have include leopards and man. They are hunted for bush meat and also for muti, their scales being used to ward off magic and evil spirits and as a love charm. Our assumption is that as our pangolin was found wandering the streets of Johannesburg, he/she was an escapee from the muti trade.

Of the seven pangolin species in the world, the one that occurs in Southern Africa, *Manis temminckii*, is the least threatened. It is listed in the CITES Red Data Book as either nearly threatened or cause for least concern. However, they still need our protection and despite popular belief, many believe that their greatest threat is not from muti hunters but from land development, particularly the spraying of insecticides which kills off their only food source – ants.

OUT OF BUSHMANLAND

Story and photo by Wendy Brodie

We recently admitted a male Bushmanland Tent Tortoise, uninjured and in fairly good health, but very far from his home and its unique food and habitat arrangements. He would have come from the Northern Karoo, Bushmanland or north of the Orange River.

What is he doing here? The only tortoise that occurs naturally in Gauteng is the Leopard tortoise, but FreeMe constantly has tortoises brought in (confiscated, rescued, found, etc) which only occur in very specific areas, many hundreds of kilometres away from Gauteng. They have been deliberately picked up and brought here to become pets or to be sold as muti or into the international pet trade.

Bushmanland Tents are tiny tortoises – our fully grown male will fit comfortably on your hand! Very little is known about their feeding and general habits, so he is in a big enclosure with a large selection of succulents for him to browse on. Like most tortoises, he is also happy to eat hibiscus flowers!

Bushmanland tent tortoises have a curious method of drinking water. As downpours are very rare in arid regions, these tortoises rely on dew or mist to drink. Every few days we spray him with a bottle of water with a spray nozzle. He immediately fully extends his hind legs, tipping his shell forward and downwards. The water droplets accumulating on the shell flow into the grooves on the shell edge and drip on to his forelegs. He then drinks the water off his legs!

He is presently over-wintering with FreeMe in a special enclosure which has a specially built and heated 'house' into which he can come and go according to the weather. He is sharing this accommodation with four Serrated Tortoises (stolen from the Kalahari). He has totally different habits and tastes to them! He is always first out in the morning and last in in the evening. He loves to bask in the sun all day, while the Serrateds are far more active, scuttling inside at the first hint of cold!

As cute as he is, he will not survive for more than a short year in captivity. Away from his specialised habitat he will die a slow death. Nature Conservation rules forbid us to return tortoises to the wild unless we know exactly where they came from. This is to protect resident populations from disease and dilution of the genetic pool. This particular fine specimen is now lost to his specific breeding group for ever, probably impacting on the survival of the entire group. If only people would leave them where they find them! Move them off the road, by all means, but never take them away from the habitats in which they belong.



Bushmanland Tent Tortoises drink by raising their hind legs so that dew drips from the front of their shell!

AUCKLAND PARK PREP SCHOOL'S OWL NURSERY

Story by Kate Becker, photos by APPS

Towards the end of last year, the children and staff of Auckland Park Preparatory School (APPS) were thrilled, delighted, excited and overjoyed (all at the same time!) to become the proud custodians of two baby Spotted Eagle Owls. Jonathan Haw and his son, Alex, of EcoSolutions' Owl Box Project installed a hacking box with two owlets of around two weeks old (rescued by FreeMe).

Mrs Kay Cottrell and her Grade 5 girls fed the owls from Monday to Friday and on Saturdays the girls from our Outreach Saturday Learning School fed them. On Sundays, Mrs Cottrell, Mrs Becker, Mrs Spanos and Mrs Dane took turns to feed the owls. We all took great pride in being surrogate mums to these precious babies.

The Grade 5 girls held a competition to name the owls and entries cost R5.00 a go! Our owls were proudly named 'Hiccup' and 'Squeak' and all collected monies were donated to FreeMe.

Part of the responsibility of taking ownership of the owls was to undertake a project on owls in the form of an audio visual presentation as well as a play which was presented by the Grade 5 girls at their class assembly on 14 November 2008. Jonathan Haw and a reporter from the Saturday Star came along and were overwhelmed by what the girls had prepared all by themselves. We even appeared on Page 2 of the newspaper the next day!

The much anticipated day of their release arrived and on 20 November, Grade 5 girls, parents and APPS staff members braved the very early morning start of 04:30 to witness their release. We all held our breath as the owl nursery box door was opened permanently. Tentatively, our brave little babies eventually stepped out of their box and felt earth on their feet for the first time. They spent a long time taking in their new surroundings. It was a moment I shall never forget. At last, they could stretch their beautiful and enormous wings fully and learn to walk for the first time. They even tried to fly and realised this would take a little more practice!

Our babies were free at last and ready to take the next step in their rehabilitation - practising flying and catching their own prey as their feeds were gradually reduced. We were thrilled that they chose to stay close by (actually under our feet most of the time!), but during the summer holidays they eventually took off to make their own way in the big wide world.

I don't know whether working with these baby owls was what finally pushed one of our Grade 2 teachers, Mrs Nugent, and I to join FreeMe on their volunteer orientation course, but we are now both officially FreeMe volunteers and looking forward to the many, many successful rehabilitation and release experiences that lie ahead of us!



APPS owls: the arrival ... and the release!

NICCI'S CLINIC AND RELEASE NOTES

Photos by Nicci Wright



BROWN SNAKE EAGLE

An adult brown snake eagle was found, not flying, on a Waterberg reserve and treated by a local vet for a week. When it failed to improve they brought it through to FreeMe for further treatment. There was no physical trauma, so Dr Brett Russell, our avian vet, X-rayed the bird and discovered a mass on/near the liver. Tests for avian TB came back negative, so we treated the bird for a general infection, which cleared the condition.

Last week our raptor consultant, Jonathan Haw, his assistant Zander and I tested the

bird for flight by attaching a creance (or long rope) to its leg and letting it go in a large open field. Thankfully, it flew strongly! The next step is to get the bird ringed: then the reserve will collect it and release it back into its territory in the Waterberg!



AFRICAN WILDCAT

Some weeks back a chap on a Free State farm phoned to say his dogs had discovered what they thought was an African Wild Cat kitten. They kept it for a couple of weeks until they could get it to us in Johannesburg.

We unboxed a hissy, spitty little kitten, certainly wild by nature, but her true genetics were unknown. I contacted Dr Desire Dalton at the Molecular Genetics Research Department at the National Zoo

in Pretoria. This specialist department does DNA comparisons to determine genetic diversity in various species. The African Wild Cat species can interbreed with feral or domestic cats, resulting in hybrids. In order to check that we are dealing with purebreds, we take a blood sample which Dr Dalton compares to the genetic markers in a domestic cat sample. I was happy to get the results this week which show that our young African Wild Cat is indeed pure!

The next step for her is to go into a big pre-release enclosure in the Makalali Reserve in Limpopo Province, where we have released other Wild Cats. Audrey, the Reserve's ecologist, and her husband Ross will oversee the release process, which they have done many times before.

SQUIRRELS

What a joy it is to watch an animal recover from suffering inflicted by my species! The squirrel who had been confined to a hamster cage, unable to jump or stretch, is now in an outside enclosure. He spends hours lying in the sun, grooming and watching life around him. Watching him able to run up and down the branches and along the ropes in his cage, I marvel at the physical capacity to heal.

Meanwhile somewhere in Pretoria a young female squirrel, an illegal pet, had begun biting and was brought in to FreeMe. I decided to introduce her to the older male and was delighted when the meeting went well. I'm not sure if either animal had seen, groomed or played with another of their own species, because they had been kept alone. Watching them discover fun and play was incredible!

Another two, a male and female, were brought in by their owner who realised that she had done them a huge disservice. Their story is separately told by their 'owner'.

Being adult animals, they would not accept the other two, so they occupy a separate aviary and will be kept separately until release day.



BUSHBABY UPDATE

Photo by Rene Walker

We're so fortunate at FreeMe to have wonderful release sites in safe reserves and conservancies with compassionate people to help us release animals sensitively, and with support feeding and care. We have had several lesser bushbabies brought to FreeMe, some 11g babies that we've handraised, a couple of injured sub-adults, and a lost pet. These animals spent time

in an outside enclosure acclimatising to being outside, eating insects and acacia gum, etc. Volunteer Cindy and her husband set up a webcam which recorded the nocturnal activities of the bushbabies, very interesting! (Also recorded was all the illegal canoodling between volunteer and bushbaby that went on in there!)

Our bushbabies have been lucky to find themselves ensconced in an amazing pre-release enclosure built by Anton and Rene Walker on their farm in the Waterberg. They went up there about 3 weeks ago and are doing very well. Rene has raised and rehabilitated many bushbabies, which are released on the farm. I'm really grateful to the Walkers for undertaking this last stage of rehabilitation as I know it will be done slowly and these animals will have support for as long as necessary when they are released in the spring.

NICCI'S CLINIC AND RELEASE NOTES *continued...*



VERVET NEWS

The little male vervet finally had his pin removed by Dr Brett Russell. He had been picked up about 5 weeks previously on the side of the road, with a fractured right femur.

I tried to make his stay in the clinic as interesting as possible, putting in flowers and leaves from different trees for him to shred and eat. It was interesting to see how he responded and what he preferred out of the variety of cage enrichment and stimulus I offered him. He was very suspicious of mealworms and crickets were treated with extreme caution. It took a couple of days before he realised that they were delicious! The daily Traumeel and Rescue tablets were taken between finger

and thumb and sucked like a delicacy, as were his vitamin chews! It took a week before he would allow me to groom him, a necessary comfort for him, and then it was my turn to have any scabs/scratches thoroughly picked, bled and 'doctored'!

Under anaesthetic, he continued to hold my finger while Brett easily located and extricated the pin. The bone had calloused beautifully. Three days later, I drove up to Sanwild with him for his final stage of rehabilitation. He was slowly introduced to a group of vervets, juveniles and young adults, which form part of a research study funded by the Humane Society. He was placed in an enclosure inside the huge, electrically fenced camp which surrounds trees and natural environment. The group are fed daily but also forage for natural food, and are getting used to other wildlife, predator sounds and smells. They all bond together in a cohesive group, orientating themselves to the sleeping tree and mountains so that when the fence is removed in the future, they will recognise their territory. You can read about this project on www.sanwild.org.



Nicci with Karen Trendler and Louise Joubert at the Sanwild vervet camp

CHEEKY: A VERY SPECIAL FRIEND

Story and photos by Elise Dymond



He was brought to me as a tiny naked little thing of one or two days old. He was starving, and quickly got the hang of begging for food. He ate anything that was offered to him and subsequently grew rapidly. He was a very lively and talkative youngster that loved attention. When his first feathers started appearing, I was thrilled that they were blue and that Cheeky was therefore a Glossy Starling (and not an Indian Mynah!).

After a few weeks Cheeky was joined by another starling of similar age. "Good" I thought, "now we won't have the problem of him imprinting on me". But that was not to be – a few months later when they were released together, his companion hung around for a week or two to eat the support food I offered them, and then gradually moved off and was only occasionally seen in a distant tree.

Cheeky however seemed to get more and more attached to me. Whenever I went into the garden he was there waiting for me and would swoop down to land on the grass at my feet or follow me around, flying from tree to tree. As soon as I went into the gazebo where I kept my worm culture, he would fly in through the open door and settle on my shoulder and gulp down the worms as they were picked from the culture; sometimes losing his footing on my shoulder and flapping wildly with his wings as he eagerly reached for the next worm. Cheeky could quite happily guzzle 20 to 30 worms at a time! Afterwards he would often be seen searching successfully for more worms on the lawn.

Cheeky was a very inquisitive bird. When I hung out the washing on the line, he had to examine every article by giving it a good shaking with his beak! He seemed to be fascinated by the different textures. The pegs in the washing bag were also very interesting things that had to be pecked and rearranged.

Early every morning he would come in through the kitchen window to help himself to fruit or whatever else was put out for him on the sill. Green grapes were his favourite. Sometimes he would fly off with a grape or BEO pellet in his mouth. Occasionally we had noticed another starling hovering in the back ground and wondered if Cheeky was actually offering the food to it.

I never discovered where Cheeky spent his nights. During the day Cheeky started coming into the house more and more often. He negotiated his way through open windows and doors

and made himself comfortable on a door or cupboard or the back of a chair. We couldn't leave any food out on a counter or table because he would sneak in and help himself – he especially loved cheese, muffins and cake. He also wasn't shy to try other foods like cream, biscuits, quiches etc.. Whenever I was busy on the computer, he would fly in from outside and after a thorough examination of the keyboard and all the led lights, as well as a few very hard pecks on the mouse, he would settle himself in his favourite place on top of the screen, softly chatting away. Often he would stretch down to try to catch the moving cursor!

Our dogs didn't seem to bother him at all and they gradually started to ignore him even when he cheekily would hop closely past their baskets. Cheeky didn't allow me to touch him, but sometimes he would gently pull my hair or hold my finger in his beak. One day he offered me a bright red piece of plastic. A few days later he brought a feather into the house and insisted that I take it from him. Every time I put it down, he picked it up and dropped it close to my hand.

The interaction I enjoyed most happened when it was time for lunch and I was on my own without the family. He would hop around my plate and help himself to anything that took his fancy. He would gently take from my fingers whatever I offered him.

A couple of weeks ago, I flew down to the Cape for a few days. While I was away, Cheeky did come to help himself to the fruit that was put out for him on the kitchen window sill – but sadly I haven't seen him since my return. It would be the most wonderful thing if he (or it could actually be a she!) is still out there somewhere with a mate, perhaps sitting on eggs, and might one day miraculously reappear in my garden. Or has Cheeky perhaps lived up to his name and got too close to a neighbour's dog or cat?..... I really miss him.



FREEME AT THE DURRELL ZOO

Story by Anna-Maria Cosgrove

My daughter, Claire, and I recently paid a visit to the famous Durrell Zoo on the island of Jersey. Its founder, Gerald Durrell, was acutely aware of the number of species of animals under threat of extinction around the world, and the zoo specialises in breeding endangered species. I was surprised, therefore, that they have a colony of meerkats.

While we were in the queue waiting to pay our entrance fee an elderly man arrived and told us that he was a zoo guide and we could join him on a free guided tour of the zoo. We chatted with him as we waited for other visitors to join us, and, hearing our accents, wanted to know where we came from. I told him Johannesburg, South Africa, and Claire lost no time telling him that I was a wildlife rehabber. In answer to his questions I told him a little about FreeMe, especially that we took in rejected pet meerkats, formed them into groups and released them back into the wild.

By now a sizeable group of mostly English people had gathered, and we embarked on our tour. The zoo is full of interesting endangered animals kept in excellent conditions, among them gibbons, orang utangs, gorillas, maned wolves, an assortment of birds and even some tiny bright blue South American poison dart frogs.

We arrived at the meerkat enclosure, he introduced the animals and explained that they were not endangered, but were kept for study purposes, then gestured to me and stepped back, giving me the floor! I hesitated, but only for a moment. I'm no shrinking violet, and here was a chance to promote FreeMe abroad and to explain the reality of meerkat society.

Speaking off the cuff I told my audience how meerkats function as a group, including the fact that the alpha male and female reign supreme, that they suppress mating in the lower animals by bullying them into submission and that they are likely to kill any newcomer. I also explained how the group works, the fact that they live in a harsh environment and have evolved a way of life that works for them.

I then went on to explain FreeMe's role in rehabilitating pet meerkats, how people are seduced by cute and cuddly babies that soon grow up, begin biting and scent marking and self-mutilate when they are lonely. I told them of the difficulties we sometimes have in integrating them into groups and how the whole problem could be avoided if people would just remember that meerkats are wild animals and don't make good pets. I could hear surprised muttering among my audience as they gazed at the little animals on display, who gazed back as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

As we went on to the next display I reflected, as I often do, that as a FreeMe volunteer you don't know what each day will bring!

*Thanks to all our supporters -
FreeMe could not exist without your generosity!*

FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation, visit www.freeme.org.za or contact us at freeme@iburst.co.za.

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