



FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre

**RESCUE • REHABILITATE • RELEASE**



*e-Zine*

May 2009

*Dear FreeMe Members,*

*Welcome to the first edition of the FreeMe e-zine.*

*We will be sending it out on a regular basis, keeping you up to date with the happenings at the FreeMe centre.*

*I hope that you will find it worthwhile and enjoy receiving it.*

*Let us know what you think of it!*

*Best wishes*

*Hilary Millward, CEO*

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## ANOTHER SAD STORY WITH A HAPPY ENDING

*Story and photo by Nicci Wright*

Luckily for some animals, there are people out there with their eyes and ears open! Out visiting, a woman noticed a Tree Squirrel being kept as a pet, caged in a hamster cage! She confiscated it immediately and brought it to FreeMe.

We were horrified to see that this animal couldn't stretch full length because of the small cage. It had bare patches on its body which it scratched at psychotically and its hindquarters seemed atrophied due to the lack of normal movement and exercise. I took him to Dr Jill Drake to check whether he had a skin condition and we discovered that he was infested with skin mites which had caused him to scratch raw patches on his back, sides, underarms and forearms! We began treatment with Ivomec immediately and he stopped itching within hours!

Realising that the squirrel might be afraid to venture out for some time, I put the tiny cage inside one of the clinic's larger cages, positioned inviting branches and a sleeping box and opened the side. Very slowly, over the next week or so, we coaxed him out to taste an array of treats and to touch a variety of leafy branches. One of the treats hid his daily supplements of Mirracote and vitamins which are transforming his coat. He kept close to his old cage which I kept inside until he was secure enough without it. His co-ordination was poor, so jumping and climbing were impossible due to underdeveloped muscles. Every day there was more improvement as he got braver and more adventurous and when he discovered the leaves he raced around in them, excited and stimulated. His favourite sleeping place was a little hammock I strung up with a soft piece of fleece in it, he loved to run up the cage wire and fling himself into bed with abandon.

I had given him a few grass seedheads to explore and nibble and tickled him with one, which caused him to begin an exhilarating game of chase and catch, all with the seedhead! He raced up and down with my piece of grass chasing and tickling him, then it was my turn, ending in the seedhead being grabbed and nibbled! What dawned on me was that this little squirrel had found his joy again: how awesome! The best part of the game was giving him a good tickle, rendering him helpless with bliss! It's been so rewarding to watch this little character blossom and discover new things -- mealworms and moths, fruits and berries, touch soil for the first time, feel the sun and love it all!

A week ago volunteers prepared a wonderful outside enclosure for this lucky squirrel, securing climbing branches at all angles and heights, stringing up two hammocks at different heights to accommodate his climbing abilities. Putting him in his new environment for the first time, it was interesting to see what he did. The soil on the floor held his attention while he tasted it and the stones he found. This was until he felt and tasted the grass then noticed logs and branches which he scampered up. He got stuck at the top several times until he worked out a method of descent, sometimes quicker than planned!

The plan is to eventually release this little squirrel when he's ready, and judging from the huge strides he's made already, this slow release may take place in Spring/Summer 2009. Watching this little creature's transformation has been touching and very rewarding. Whenever we wonder if we're making any difference at all, we can go and spend time with the squirrel who will remind us - yes, we are!

## FREEDOM DAY BREAKOUT

Story and photos by Anna-Maria and Ken Cosgrove

Anna-Maria and Ken Cosgrove have had a variety of strange 'bird down chimney' experiences. When homeowner Joyce Zhang rang on Freedom Day and said she and husband Mike had heard noises between their chimney flue and the wall, they went to check and found that the only solution was to break the prisoner out.

Picture 1: We had brought some industrial tools with us: Ken starts to attack the double brick wall, drilling holes in the bricks then using a hammer and chisel to break them out.

Picture 2: Breakthrough! Anna-Maria holds the prisoner, a speckled pigeon.

Picture 3: Mike Zhang served us Chinese tea while we cheered Ken on. Not many people would be prepared to break walls to rescue a bird, but this couple didn't hesitate.



## CALL OF THE WILD

Education owl Eleanor has raised her two owlets and seen them disperse to their own territories. Now, with her mate roosting nearby, she's counting the days to her second season of freedom - due to start with the shortest day of the year, according to the EcoSolutions newsletter.



Photo Frances Perryer - Eleanor in her favourite tree outside the FreeMe kitchen



Photo Elise Dymond - with Eleanor at Headway charity



Photo Frances Perryer - A new owl box from EcoSolutions!



Photo Nicci Wright - The two owlets - fledged but still dependent on mum's hunting skills!

## THE CARACAL

Story by Nicci Wright, photo by Shantel Reynolds

Three years ago, a pet shop owner from the East Rand shot a female caracal and took her baby home to raise as a pet. Having compassion and respect for the animal kingdom is obviously not necessary for some dealers in the pet trade. When the young caracal became too destructive and boisterous in the house, she was incarcerated in an enclosure in the back yard, surrounded by 2m walls, her only view the sky above.

Fortunately, a visitor to the property heard her calling "prrup" and investigated until he realised that a full-grown caracal was being illegally and inhumanely kept. A call was placed to FreeMe and Margi offered advice. The animal was tranquillised one evening and brought to her new enclosure at FreeMe. She now has all kinds of stimuli, visual and tactile, as well as being put on a diet suitable for the overweight caracal.

I have received the necessary permits to transport her to the Makalali Private Reserve where the final phase of her rehabilitation will be put in place. She will be placed in a pre-release enclosure where she'll become accustomed to the sights and sounds of a natural habitat. Once radio-collared, she will begin to go on short excursions with the ecologist on the reserve; these will lengthen as her confidence grows. These walks will get her fit and stimulate her instincts. It will probably take months until she is totally comfortable with her surroundings and begins to stay out on her own. This gentle way of release will enable the process to take place at her pace and only when she's ready. At this last stage, she will be support-fed and will know where to come if she's hungry while still honing her hunting skills.

This is one of the lucky caracals who has a chance to experience her freedom. There are many out there being kept as pets, some in inhumane conditions, unable to fulfil their instincts. Please report these cases if you hear or see them.

We are looking for sponsors for the telemetry equipment needed and to cover the costs of transportation. Please contact Nicci Wright on 011 807 6993 if you can help.





### THE CARACAL STORY CONTINUES ...

Story and photo by Nicci Wright

It was all in place ... the permit, the enclosure, the time ... and so the caracal and I were to travel to Makalali early on Wednesday 13 May. Joan Grossett and I arrived at FreeMe just after 6am, put a blanket and meat inside the travel cage and hauled it over to the enclosure. My plan was that, smelling the meat inside, she would be lured inside, unstressed and calm. The caracal hissed as she wondered what we were up to, then strolled over and pulled out the blanket and 'killed' it! Reminding me to be patient and helping me to gauge when to slam the door shut, Joan ("Shut it now!") was good backup as always! We secured the cage door with cable ties and then lugged her out, over the fence, down the path and into the back of my bakkie. Whew!

We drove up to Limpopo Province, stopping along the way to check and water the caracal who remained relaxed and calm. Arriving at Makalali's gate at about 2pm, we drove into the reserve and headed for the airstrip where we met Audrey Delsink, the elephant ecologist. On a bit further through the bush and across a river to her house and the caracal's new home. Inside her new enclosure, the caracal began exploring as soon as her travel cage was opened, smelling all the new and unknown scents of the bush! She was relaxed and we left her while we met Ross, Audrey's husband, and had tea on the deck overlooking the riverbed, open to the reserve. We spent a pleasant evening sharing stories of wildlife, animals we've cared for and the crazy exploits of game rangers! I fell asleep relieved and happy that we'd been able to bring the caracal to this perfect place.

The next morning we went to check on the caracal and saw immediately that her expression was different ... all her senses were wide awake now! She'd spent the night listening to the sounds of the bush – hyenas, lion, leopard and jackal – and smelling them close-by. I think she felt more alive and excited than she had ever felt! The caracal will spend winter here and when Audrey feels the time is right, an opening will be made in the back fence of the enclosure and she will be free to come and go as she needs to. By this time, she'll have a telemetry collar on so that Audrey can monitor her movements. This is the eighth caracal released here in this way over the years and the time needed by each has varied depending on the individual animal's needs. I am so grateful to Audrey and Ross for taking this caracal too, and for being caring and sensitive to her needs as they guide and support her towards her release.

On our way out, my bakkie sank in the riversand while crossing the river! While Auds radioed Ross for assistance, Joan and I rolled up our jeans, attached the tow rope and kept an eye open for elephant, hippo, lion or anything else that could eat us! A great little adventure, we were pulled out easily and with good humour, we resumed our journey, stopping to watch animals and birds as we went.

Thank you to everyone who had a hand in rescuing and caring for this caracal. She now has the best chance to live a life in the wild, fulfilling her instincts completely!

You can visit Makalali Reserve on [www.makalali.co.za](http://www.makalali.co.za) to see the caracal's new home.

### LESSER BUSHBABIES

Story and photo by Nicci Wright

This season we have received bushbabies from all sorts of places. A lady found one bouncing around her flat when she arrived home, it had come in through an open window. Completely tame, this was obviously a stray pet. Another raised by the Joburg Zoo was given to us for rehabilitation and release. Two were wild babies found concussed and cold by farm-owners and rescued. Another had fallen from its nest, which couldn't be located, and weighed only 11 grams. The final one is a wild sub-adult who has now recovered from injuries sustained from an electric fence. It's always interesting to see what the history of each case is, where they originated and how they came to be at FreeMe.

Margi took the smallest two babies to feed special milk formula around the clock, 3-4 hourly. I took the next two in age, taught them to lap their milk formula and introduced them to a new diet of insects and acacia gum. The two older ones were placed in an enclosure as they were able to eat and care for themselves. When the four youngest were all eating completely unaided, they were introduced to the older two. All six are together in a large enclosure at FreeMe now. It has been interesting watching them explore this environment, practising their leaps and jumps from branch to branch. The volunteers created a wonderfully rich mini-habitat to stimulate their instincts and develop their agility. All six sleep crammed together in one of the several sleeping boxes they could choose from, all pushing and shoving through the exit/entrance hole to see what's going on outside. Being nocturnal, they are fed a complete diet at night consisting of a variety of insects and acacia gum.



11g on arrival ...



and now!

## CUT FEATHERS

Story and photos by Nicci Wright

This season has seen a large number of birds come in with their flight feathers cut off. These birds will all have to stay in an enclosure until their feathers have moulted and re-grown, which could be up to eight months in some cases - a terrible sentence for a wild bird!

The species are African Pied Crow, European Swift, Grass Owl, Black-collared Barbets, Black-shouldered Kites and a Pearl-spotted Owl. Some of these were mutilated by people selling them on the roadside, to render them helpless; some by people wanting to keep them captive as pets. The most distressing one, for me, is the European Swift, a beautiful strong bird which should have migrated in March. It now has to over-winter with us, being hand-fed hourly from 6am to dusk, very stressful for a creature which usually does everything on the wing. These birds tend to get very depressed as the days shorten, the temperature drops and the pull to migrate cannot be met because of being grounded, literally.

Cutting the flight feathers of wild birds can never be an acceptable method of restraint. The natural moulting process ensures that each new feather grows with the support of the unmoulted ones next to it - if this natural support is not present the feathers may not be correctly aligned. Worse, if the damage extends to the feather follicles, the new feathers may corkscrew and be permanently useless.



The stresses of the hunt mean that Black-shouldered Kites have to be feather-perfect.



Grass Owls need perfect feathers for that long, silent glide down to their prey.



Those missing feathers - long, strong primaries - would have taken this European Swift on a journey of thousands of kilometres.

## THE SEASON'S REPTILES

Story and photos by Nicci Wright

The variety of reptile species that we have had in this season has been amazing, with lots of snake calls requesting removals or needing advice. These have ranged from the sad to the funny to the alarmingly challenging!

A sad call was from a woman living on a farm, who said she had a cobra in the lounge spitting at her. Her description, including an orange mouth, was obviously of a Red-lipped Herald snake. This poor creature had lifted its head off the floor to have a can of Doom emptied into its face. I explained that this was inhumane, and because she lived on a farm, I advised her to go on a snake ID and handling course to educate herself.

There have been snakes in cupboards, garages, under sheds and down holes. Often people's adrenalin is flowing and this leads to exaggerated lengths and descriptions of hugely venomous beasts lurking in wait! However, one call turned out to be long, huge and in need of urgent help. One Sunday a call came through from Kromdraai to say there was a big African Rock Python up a tree, with a large crowd trying to kill it.



Out on a limb - a large python flees for its life!

Gary Bennetts, who lives in the area and handles snakes, was called, then the West Rand Fire Department, as the snake was very high up. They climbed the tree, tried to cut it down and still couldn't reach the snake. Eventually the only solution was to bend the tree by roping it and pulling it over with the fire truck. The snake fell down and the crowd dispersed screaming! I checked the snake with Gary and decided to keep it quiet for 24 hours then reassess it. Thankfully it had recovered enough to be released in a nearby conservancy, a truly magnificent creature!

We've had many Rinkhals, a Mozambique Spitting Cobra, Puff Adders, Night Adders, Brown House Snakes, an Aurora House Snake and redlips. A couple of unlucky African Rock Pythons had been injured so badly they had to be euthanased.

The biggest Nile Monitor I've seen was caught by the Springs SPCA and delivered to us in March. It must have been 1.8m long and had a body as thick as my thigh. We usually get a few of these each season, especially when the heavy rains fall and they get washed down the spruets and stormwater drains.



Release in a safe conservancy for the Nile Monitor

## **THE SEASON'S REPTILES CONTINUED ...**

Flap-necked chameleons are frequent cases at FreeMe, often having had their eyes pecked by birds which perceive them as predators. Chameleons from further afield have come to our attention too, after being confiscated or bought by holiday makers, especially in the Eastern Cape. We appeal to people not to buy these animals: report the sellers to the local authorities instead. Buying illegally sold wildlife supports the trade of them!

Hundreds of tortoises pass through our facility yearly; some confiscated, some injured, but many are illegal pets which are being "dumped". We do not agree with any wildlife being kept as pets, with or without a permit, and appeal to the public not to buy tortoises from illegal sellers on the roadside.

Marsh Terrapins are often brought to us, some newly hatched (see pic) and some old warriors that have survived for years. The number of these species needing assistance has increased because of habitat loss.



Small but perfect - a newly hatched Marsh Terrapin

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

FreeMe Wildlife Rehabilitation, visit [www.freeme.org.za](http://www.freeme.org.za) or contact us at [freeme@iburst.co.za](mailto:freeme@iburst.co.za).

*Thanks to the following volunteers for their contribution to this issue*

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