

Here are some reports of field assistants that worked in Goegap.

ANIMALS OF THE WEEK

By Stella Miranda Treffler

Today I would like to tell you which animals you might meet during an ordinary week in Goegap Nature Reserve.

We, Julian and I, the two field assistants of the research station at the time, ones more radio-tracked the mice to determine their home ranges. I had just found one mouse and concentrated on my receiver to put in the next frequency. Unfortunately, while doing that I did not watch my step. I realized nearly too late that I was walking towards a black spitting cobra (*Naja nigricollis*). The snake was crossing the dry riverbed with his head raised and an opened shield. Scared I watched this elegant, but very dangerous animal creeping into the next shrub. Julian saw it a few minutes later while it was changing its hiding place.

On one of the next rounds, I stumbled on another snake. This one was much smaller, maybe about half a meter. I guess it was a stripe-bellied sand snake (*Psammophis subtaeniatus*) or a short-snouted grass snake (*Psammophis brevirostris*). In contrast to the cobra they are not dangerous for humans.

After we finished our work we met a Namaqua rock mouse (*Aethomys namaquensis*) in the kitchen. It moved cheerfully over our plates and pots and was only disturbed by the flashing light of my camera. This nocturnal animal took the time to inspect the whole kitchen, before it finally decided to go into a mousetrap.

Thursday night we saw a bat in the bathroom. We forgot to close the bathroom door the last time we went there.

After it had fluttered around a few minutes, it hung from the ceiling and allowed us to take some photographs. After that it remembered where the exit was.

But the most spectacular guest that visited us arrived on Friday night. It was a bright yellow Cape cobra (*Naja nivea*), the most poisonous snake of Namaqualand, comparable to a black mamba. The mouse-room is part of the veranda, where eleven

striped mice groups live in cages. We were already in bed, but as our room is next to the mice-room, we could hear some noises in the mouse room, almost like mice running mad in the cages. Julian stood up and went there to have a look. After a short time he shouted, "There is a cape cobra in the mouse-room!" He seemed shocked.

I jumped in my shoes, fetched my torch and ran to him. There we stood, starring at the cobra, which throned on a cage (she could not enter them) and stared back at us. We did nothing, for we did not know what to do. We were fascinated and scared. The snake decided to creep away, but hesitated behind a cage at the opposite wall. We agreed at that time that the dangerous animal should not escape, because otherwise it would visit us again and again.

So we tried to be brave and went in the mouse room. We pushed the cages on both sides of the hidden snake to the wall, so there was no space to escape. Then we put some wooden boards over the cage where the snake was hiding and fixed everything with stones.

Maybe there was no need for that, but we thought we would sleep better.

Of course we both dreamed of the snake. The next morning Johann, the husband of Maxie the reserve manager, his son and Melanie were there. We showed them our unwanted visitor and they promised to help us. They came back later with some equipment to remove the big cobra and released it far, far away from us. Now that was good luck!

In addition I would like to mention the Hartmann's mountain zebra (*Equus zebra hartmannae*) that we saw after our nest observation one morning. Unfortunately, it ran away quickly.

I also spotted two jackals (*Canis mesomelas*) one morning on my way to the nest observation. The jackals were not too pleased with my presence. I guess they were searching for some mice in the riverbed,
During the last weeks we saw several times some chacma baboons (*Papio cynocephalus ursinus*), that live here. You can hear them quite often, especially in the morning hours. Unfortunately you nearly always need binoculars to watch them. Many insects, spiders, reptiles, birds, antelopes and different small mammals are also seen every day, but we already got used to them. Nevertheless, we enjoy the lively nature around us.

How to become a field assistant?

Only people with a biological background can become field assistants. These are students of biology, veterinary medicine or related areas. The work of field assistants includes: radio-tracking, trapping and marking of small mammals, behavioural observations, work at the research station, including maintenance, and much more.

People interested in working as a field assistant for 2-3 months write an email to info@stripedmouse.com. Please write a short motivation and attach a CV. You will then obtain more information.





The extremely poisonous Cape cobra likes also bush Karoo rats for dinner (see below)

REVIEW

By Julian Brenner & Stella Miranda Treffler

When writing this review, we have been almost five months here in Goegap. It was a nice but also hard time. And for the sixth we don't expect anything different.

In October we took a plane to the South: Frankfurt am Main → Cape Town, then by bus to Springbok. We arrived in Springbok at 2 am, so we spent our first hours at one of Springbok's gas stations. In the morning we finally reached Goegap. It was October the 7th. Carsten and Melanie were waiting for us at the research station. In the first weeks we learnt how to manage our assignments. After we completed the first part of our project – to study the influence of various factors on the home range size of female striped mice – a short vacancy was a nice and adventurous change. We visited Augrabies National Park and Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. It was very hot in the Kalahari, which was quite in contrast to the previous months in Goegap where we wished we had taken along a wooly hat or some other warm clothes.

The next months we were busy trapping and tagging mice at the field-site, observe their nesting site and enter our project data in the computer and to interpret it. From day to day the work made us sweat – what was more due to the increasing heat than to the work.

In spite of the high temperatures and the great distance to our families in Germany we developed Christmas feelings and baked biscuits –some of them were even eatable.

When something didn't work out we had to question Carsten, until December that was. Then he left the research station to start his new job at the University of Zurich.

Shortly afterwards, Melanie moved out and was only present while working, which means during the night, when she radio-tracked her elephant shrews.

From end of January to mid-February the research station was renovated. The roof got a new insulation and the kitchen was painted yellow, Carsten's and Brigitte's living and work room baby-blue. After that Brigitte followed her husband and left the research station (though we do not think this was due to the baby blue colour).

For a few weeks we were alone at the research station until Eva and Britta came to help Melanie with her work in the field. The new field-assistants arrived in February and lived in Melanie's previous room. Now we took up again with the every-Saturday-braai, what we had cancelled when we were alone.

But Britta couldn't be kept from leaving. For her it was too much work. So we were only three remaining, but we had more place in the fridge.

The weather became a bit colder so that we could use our wooly hats we had got in the meantime.

Although we become more and more impatient to see our family, friends and fresh German rolls again, it is a pity to leave in a short time. But the time went by and it was worthwhile.

Though we devoted ourselves to the striped mice we also met a lot of other animals: African wild cat, gemsbok, springbok, ostrich, steenbok, klipspringer, black-backed jackal, aardwolf, aardvark, Hartmann's mountain zebra, elephant shrews, Namaqua rock mouse, pygmy mouse and bush Karoo rat, owls and buzzards, puffadder, black-spitting cobra and Cape cobra, blind snakes, sand and grass snake, lizards, geckos, agamas and a lot of insects and birds.

And in the Kalahari were a lot more of "true" African animals like lions, hyenas, giraffes, vultures and eagles...

The pure nature in front of your house we will miss for sure, but who knows? Perhaps, we'll be back.

GOEGAP BY NIGHT

By Julian Brenner

Carsten asked us a few days after our arrival if he could show us the Nature Reserve. Time was our choice, so we decided to go on a night-drive, because we knew that at this time most animals are active.

So we arranged to meet with Carsten at dusk. We put on warm clothes, since the nights are often really cold here, took our torches, binoculars, as well as chocolate bars and got into Carsten's Land Rover. Melanie came along too. Although she works at night, she didn't manage to see an Aardvark, yet. And now there was a slight possibility to see it during the night drive. Carsten had plugged in the spotlights and explained to us how to use them. For the best results you should move it slowly from left to right. You should also take care not to shine the light too far, because you cannot make out animals in a far distance.

After we got everything set we left and drove into the starlit night. We took the 4x4-route. and Carsten warned us that the road might not be passable, even for the Land Rover, because of the previous heavy rainfalls.

We were told to look out for the reflection of the eyes of the animals. It was very interesting to hear that the eyes of herbivore shine blue and that of carnivore's red. The rock rabbit is the only herbivore whose eyes reflect red in the spot light.

The first spotted pair of eyes was blue and belonged to a Steenbok. That's a small gazelle that looks like Bambi. The next animals we could see, we knew as we saw them many times during the day: Gemsboks and Springboks. Then, we saw a pair of red eyes in a bush. They were moving fast through the grass. We decided that it had to be an Aardwolf, a shy hyena-species. Later we spotted several more aardwolves closer to the car, and also some curious jackals.

We also spotted some ostriches that ran away like startled chicken, of course much faster.

In the meantime Carsten shared several interesting details about the animals and inspected our zoological knowledge by questions such as: "How many species of hyena are there?" (4, e.g. the Aardwolf) or "Are Rock-rabbits rodents?" (No, they are rabbits). We couldn't answer everything right and had to guess sometimes.

The night-drive gave us a real African-safari-feeling, especially because of the rocking ride on the bad road. But with good luck and Carsten' excellent driving skills– we were able to pass the whole route. For us, it was an exciting small adventure, though we didn't spot the Aardvark. Well, that gives us a good reason to repeat the experience again.



The aardwolf can be seen regularly during night drives in Goegap

TRAPPING MICE

By Stella Miranda Treffler

After a few weeks of being field-assistants filled with work we had a new job to do: We had to catch and mark striped mice. This was exciting to us and was more fun than determining home-ranges or making plant-surveys, that we did before.

In the beginning we had doubts, whether we would manage it without hurting the mice. Our concerns aroused because we had no experience at all in handling mice. My only experience was with a little rabbit I had as a child.

But it all worked out fine, because we watched how Carsten did it several times and practiced under his supervision. Afterwards we were prepared to do the trapping on our own. So we carried about 15 to 20 mousetraps to each nest and put bran flakes and currants, mixed with salt and sunflower-oil as bait in it. Then the traps were placed in the shade in front of the nests. Each morning and afternoon we had to set and check the traps. This we did for two days. Then we went on to the next couple of nests.

Well, a trap is closed. First thing we thought was that there was a striped mouse in it. Mostly we were right but sometimes we

caught a bush Karoo rat, an elephant-shrew, a bird or even an agame or simply nothing. But then, it was a striped mouse. We took a transparent plastic-bag and put it around the trapdoor. Then we slang the mouse in the bag. Sometimes there was even more than one mouse in a trap. After we got the mouse out of the trap into the plastic bag, we took it in our right hand and checked the sex and reproductive status. If the animal was already marked with an ear tag, we checked the ID-number. The partner writes down everything. A mouse without an ear tags gets one. For this we needed to get the mouse into the left hand, because with the other hand we had to handle the nippers with which we placed the tags on the ears. One ear tag per ear. For a beginner this is not as easy as it may sound, because of the sharp teeth of the mice. In the end we had to cut a little piece of the mouse' tail to get a tissue sample. Freedom for the mouse was almost near because the only thing we had to do now was to weight the mouse. All we needed was a scale and the ability to read numbers. Finally the mouse was allowed to go home. All done!



The mice in Goegap are very trap happy, which means they readily enter traps.

JUST ARRIVED ...

- First impressions by a new field assistant -

by Annette Wiedon (Annette was October- December 2004 in Goegap)

After a few days in Cape Town I found myself on the way to the Goegap Nature Reserve. The friendly driver of the minibus-taxi brought me to the office of the reserve, a nice thatched roof building that fits perfectly into the environment. Here I meet David, one of the two reserve managers. He offered to bring me to the research station. The short drive in his 4x4 immediately gave me a feeling that I was on Safari. For the first time I saw springbok and gemsbok. The scenery is quite amazing: I would never have thought that a mixture of stones and sand can be so impressive. They pile up to ochre hills without much vegetation, a fascinating landscape.

My arrival at the research station was rather unimpressive: Instead of a nice welcome I found the research station deserted. In addition, the house is by far is not as nice as the office. David leaves, and after a few minutes I see some figures coming from the field. A diploma student and a field assistant introduced themselves and shortly afterwards Carsten and his girlfriend Brigitte arrived as well. I got a cup of tea and a tour through the research station. There were so many new impressions I had to process when I finally fell into my bed.

Work starts early at the research station. Thus I was happy that I could sleep in the first day. I got out of my sleeping bag around 8 in the morning, when the other students were already coming back from the field. Still hanging over my coffee, I got a bad conscience while still feeling tired, listening to the other students that already did their first work of the day. They all seem to be very busy, talking about things like S 136 and the nest of F414, things I did not understand. However, soon afterwards I left for the field site and had my own first experiences. My work for that day was to perform some plant surveys, so with some measuring tape and a writing board in my hands, I inspected the field. It was already noon time and very hot. That didn't make things easier for an office student like me. And there was something else I had to do: I had to watch every step of mine and every shrub very carefully, listening to every movement and noise: I had been told that here are many snakes in Goegap, some of them being poisonous.... After this first day in the field I fell tired into my bed and slept like a log.

The next morning I already felt fitter than the previous day, both physically and psychologically. At least I knew in the meantime the meaning of S 136 and F 414*, making me feel like a real member of the research station. I took my working equipment and – without hesitation – went into the field. Again, it was very hot

and hard work, but I was proud of all the plant species I already knew. Opposite in the hills I saw and heard a group of baboons chasing each other – I had to realize that I was not in a zoo but in the field and for a short period I felt like Diane Fossey. An atmosphere of adventures developed around me. I was also surprised that I was still not bitten by a poisonous snake and slowly but surely relaxed while working in the field. While having dinner with the other students I heard funny stories about puff adders, scorpions and cockroaches, making me happy to be in the house – in our house in Goegap.

F414 is the female striped mouse with the number 414. The F stands for female. S 136 is the nest of the pair consisting of F478 and M429 (M for male). S stands for sleeping site.

The Behaviour of a Field Assistant (*Laborulus voluntarii*) in a Remote Study Area of the Succulent Karoo

By *Berit Kostka* (Berit was February/ March 2005 in Goegap)

„I would think about it” was what I read in the email I received to tell me my application as a field assistant got accepted. “There will be no other field assistants and it can be very lonely out here”. Well, this is exactly why I want to come, I thought! I wanted to learn about the methods used in field biology, but also find out if working in remote field sites without much human company would suit me.

And learn I did! On my first day I got introduced to the - in the meantime to all readers well-known - Striped Mouse (*Rhabdomys pumilio*) and how one best catches them. Not an easy task! After the first few attempts of handling the small animals with their fast defence mechanism, my sore fingers would force the operation to a halt – at least for now. But every master needs practise, so after a while I learnt the trick and the mice had to surrender.

Most days were filled with the obligatory nest observation every morning and afternoon, sometimes accompanied by different experiment equipment like mouse models to measure the temperature at the basking places. Some individuals found their dead colleagues very intriguing indeed! It was very pleasant to watch the mouse groups bathe in the sun and interact with each other. Especially in the morning, when the sun was warming also my back after a chilly start, the whole field site was slowly waking up and the birds greeting the new day.

An easier routine than the trapping was the daily radio-tracking. Although during the very hot days – one afternoon we measured 50°C! – it was rather strenuous to walk through the field site, lots of other inhabitants of the succulent karoo showed themselves on my way round. For example many different kinds of lizards and skinks, beetles and birds, amongst which my favourite is the Bokmakierie with its melodious song and beautiful appearance. A group of baboons made their presence known by shouting from the hillsides, and herds of Springbok, Gemsbok and even Mountain Zebra were roaming the softly rolling slopes. One rendezvous in the bush was not all that pleasant when I encountered a spitting cobra during a trapping session. There she was all of a sudden, hissing at me and trying to impress with her shield open. I don't know who got the bigger shock, but luckily the cobra quickly retreated from the spot. Yet I was fascinated to see a

snake in its natural habitat and see how it reacts to humans. It certainly cleared potential prejudices about snakes biting humans for defence! Why should they waste their venom if they can run?

The absolute highlight during my stay here though was a night game drive. It conveyed a real feeling of the African bush, standing on the back of the 4x4 and shining spotlights through the pitch black darkness. And luck was on our side! Amongst other animals we were able to see Aardvark (which I had been waiting for for weeks!), Porcupine, Aardwolf, Jackals and Bat-eared foxes.

All in all during my stay at Goegap I learned a lot about field methodology and had the opportunity to practise them thoroughly so that after a while they became a routine and I was able to carry them out “blind-folded”. With no other field assistants around I had the best supervisor-student ratio one could wish for, plus, which is very convenient, I had my own room! Loneliness wasn't a problem at all, instead I enjoyed nature all the more, gazing at the jaw-dropping star sky and found the tranquillity to appreciate even the smallest amongst the small.