

African Snakebite Institute Herpetological Association

HERP BULLETIN

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photographed by Johan Marais

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MEET THE TEAM

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Background - dorsal view of
the Geometric Tortoise
(*Psammobates geometricus*)



Become a member!

Send an email to
Admin@asiorg.co.za
to join the ASIHA.
This will give you access to the
ASIHA Herp Bulletin a month
before its public release.
We can also assist members with
keeping permits of reptiles in
South Africa.



Submissions

We welcome editorial and
photographic submissions to
the newsletter. If you have any
interesting articles about African
reptiles or amphibians, please
send the article to
Snakes@asiorg.co.za



WELCOME

Over the past ten years we have been doing a lot of education about snakes and interacting with members of the public, from school children to farmers, lawyers, scientists, and medical doctors. In addition to our public and corporate courses we have also grown our social media platforms and now have close on 400,000 people on our various Facebook pages while the ever-popular app, ASI Snakes, has had well over 100,000 downloads. The monthly ASI newsletter goes out to more than 30,000 people. My first newsletter was put together in the 1980s with help from my good friend Prof. Graham Alexander. We started a Natal branch of the Herpetological Association of Africa and used a Redstone computer with 64 kb memory to create our newsletters and our little local association grew rapidly. Some of our meetings were attended by more than 50 people and we had the likes of Dr. John Poynton, Prof. Eddie van Dijk and a bunch of local reptile enthusiasts eagerly listening to speakers sharing their knowledge and experiences.

It is easy to underestimate the power of social media. In a recent scientific paper by Dr. Bryan Maritz and Dr. Robin Maritz, they report on over 1,900 reptile

predation records that were posted on the Facebook page Predation Records – Reptiles and Frogs (Sub-Saharan Africa) over a four-year period. I would hate to try and look up 1,900 predation reports in the published literature! A variety of interesting reptile and frog observations regularly appear on various Facebook pages, attract some comments but are then easily lost. This was part of the motivation to start the ASIHA Herp Bulletin – a publication where such observations by herpetological enthusiasts can be published and in a bulletin that will be easily accessible in future.

Historically, most worthwhile herpetological observations are published either in scientific journals or in newsletters attached to such journals. These publications are vital as the articles are peer reviewed and accredited and are a good outlet for scientists to publish their research.

There are many worthwhile observations, especially by amateur herpetologists and naturalists, that do not meet the criteria of scientific publications and worthwhile information is easily lost. Historically some of these observations were published in magazines like African Wildlife.

The idea behind the ASIHA Herp Bulletin is not to compete with formal associations and their publications and here I am specifically referring to the Herpetological Association of Africa. The HAA produces two scientific journals a year as well as two editions of their newsletter – the African Herp News. Both are excellent publications and I have been a proud member of the HAA for more than 40 years. If you are a reptile enthusiast and not a member

of the HAA, please consider joining immediately. It is inexpensive and in addition to the publications, the HAA also hosts a herpetological conference every second year. For details please email the secretary, Dr. Melissa Petford at secretary@africanherpetology.org.

The ASIHA Herp Bulletin will happily accept any interesting field observations, interesting photographs, field notes and interesting field trips, breeding and behavioural records as well as details of snake bites. We also welcome contributions from reptile keepers provided it is on African reptiles and amphibians.

Membership of the African Snakebite Institute Herpetological Association is open to anyone and we will be hosting bimonthly meetings in Gauteng during which an invited speaker will share some wisdom. The Association will also assist keepers, who keep indigenous reptiles and frogs, with permit applications and the association is accredited with GDARD to sign off permit applications. Foreigners are also welcome to join the organisation as corresponding members and will receive our ASIHA Herp Bulletin at no charge.

All of our bulletins will be placed on the African Snakebite Institute website a month after publication and will then be available to anyone to read or download.

We look forward to the growth of this publication and strengthening the knowledge and interest in Africa's amazing reptile and amphibian diversity.



Johan Marais
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Venda Bound

Images and text by **Ruan Stander**

On the 12th of June 2020, Willem van der Merwe and I left a cold and windy Polokwane at around 11:00am; Destination: Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa.

As we snaked through the bends of Wyllie's Poort and descended the northern slopes of the Soutpansberg, our world changed. We were now well north of the Tropic of Capricorn; the sun was shining, and it was already five degrees warmer.

We would spend the next five days and four nights in the tropics chasing down reptiles while most of South Africa was in the icy grip of an expansive cold front. Up in Venda however, even the Clicking Stream Frogs (*Strongylopus grayii*) were out and mating! Our base for the trip was on the sandstone ridges at the northeastern foothills of the Soutpansberg. The area is characterised by deep aeolian and Kalahari sands and extensive sandstone outcrops in mixed dry bushveld, as well as riparian vegetation along streams and rivers.

Generally, winter and reptiles are not closely associated, however this part of the country experiences more of a wet season and a dry season as opposed to a true summer and winter. Here winters, though significantly cooler, are still warm enough for reptiles to go about life as normal. The first evening was cold

with minimum temperatures of around 8°C, while the coldest day was 24°C and the warmest a lovely 27°C! Reptiles were located by actively searching; this included walking and observing any basking or moving reptiles, inspecting rock crevices, looking under rocks and logs and in tree hollows, and conducting night walks. We spent one of the days in the eastern Limpopo valley, joined by friend, Rofitwa Maravha. This area was vastly different and much warmer. The area is dominated by Mopane trees (*Colophospermum mopane*) growing in basaltic soil with scattered drainage lines and a very homogenous landscape.

A total of 25 reptile and three amphibian species were recorded between the two locations. Highlights included Tiger Gecko (*Pachydactylus tigrinus*), Richard's Legless Skink (*Acontias richardi*) and Slender Worm Lizard (*Monopeltis sphenorhynchus*). The Acontias records were particularly exciting since only about 16 have ever been formally documented, including the three found on this trip. Other endemic, localised or notable species that were a pleasure to see were Pienaar's Flat Gecko (*Afroedura pienaari*), Stevenson's Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus stevensoni*), Limpopo Dwarf Burrowing Skink (*Scelotes l. limpopoensis*) and Dwarf Puddle Frog (*Phrynobatrachus mababiensis*).



Top left - Richard's Legless Skink (*Acontias richardii*), **top right** - Tiger Gecko (*Pachydactylus tigrinus*).
Bottom left - Campsite in sandstone ridges at the northeastern foothills of the Soutpansberg. **Bottom right** - Slender Worm Lizard (*Monopeltis sphenorhynchus*).

Species Lists

Reptiles

1. Western Yellow-bellied Sand Snake (*Psammophis subtaeniatus*)
2. Black-headed Centipede-eater (*Aparallactus capensis*)
3. Speckled Gecko (*Pachydactylus punctatus*)
4. Tiger Gecko (*Pachydactylus tigrinus*)
5. Turner's Gecko (*Chondrodactylus turneri*)
6. Wahlberg's Velvet Gecko (*Homopholis wahlbergii*)
7. Tropical House Gecko (*Hemidactylus mabouia*)
8. Pienaar's Flat Gecko (*Afroedura pienaari*)
9. Bradfield's Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus bradfieldi*)
10. Common Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus capensis*)
11. Stevenson's Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus stevensoni*)
12. Zimbabwe Flat Lizard (*Platysaurus intermedius rhodesianus*)
13. Bushveld Lizard (*Heliobolus lugubris*)
14. Common Rough-scaled Lizard (*Meroles squamulosus*)
15. Holub's Sandveld Lizard (*Nucras holubi*)
16. Rainbow Skink (*Trachylepis margaritifera*)
17. Striped Skink (*Trachylepis striata*)
18. Damara Variable Skink (*Trachylepis damarana*)
19. Richard's Legless Skink (*Acontias richardi*)
20. Sundevall's Writhing Skink (*Mochlus sundevallii*)
21. Spotted-necked Snake-eyed Skink (*Panaspis maculicollis*)
22. Limpopo Dwarf Burrowing Skink (*Scelotes l. limpopoensis*)
23. Slender Worm Lizard (*Monopeltis sphenorhynchus*)

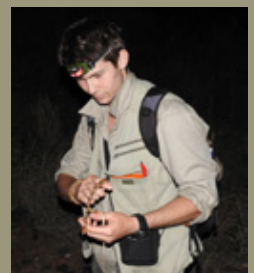
24. Peters' Ground Agama (*Agama armata*)
25. Water Monitor (*Varanus niloticus*)

Amphibians

1. Clicking Stream Frog (*Strongylopus grayii*)
2. Dwarf Puddle Frog (*Phrynobatrachus mababiensis*)
3. Müller's Platanna (*Xenopus muelleri*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruan has had a keen interest in the natural world since childhood. He has conducted herpetological surveys in Limpopo since 2015 and began working as a field guide in 2016. He has been a member of the ADU Virtual Museum ReptileMAP expert panel since 2016. Ruan's primary interests include biogeography, ecology and ethology; and he is also an avid photographer.



BOOK REVIEW

The Dangerous Snakes of Africa

- Steve Spawls and Bill Branch

The Dangerous Snakes of Africa by Stephen Spawls and Bill Branch. Published by Bloomsbury Wildlife. 336 pages. Available from the African Snakebite Institute for R795.00.

The first edition of *The Dangerous Snakes of Africa* was published back in 1995 by Southern Books, had 192 pages and sold out quite quickly. Secondhand copies were selling for over R1,000.00.

The new edition is very much a different book with 336 pages, over 400 colour photographs largely by Stephen Spawls and Bill Branch, but with numerous contributions from over 60 photographers. The book covers 137 of Africa's dangerous snakes, as well as a further 70 species which may be confused with the dangerous ones.

The introductory chapters include sections on how to use the book, which snakes are dangerous, conservation, identifying snakes, the different groups of snakes, and species accounts; each with a section on identification, habitat, distribution (including a distribution map), behaviour, venom and treatment of bites.

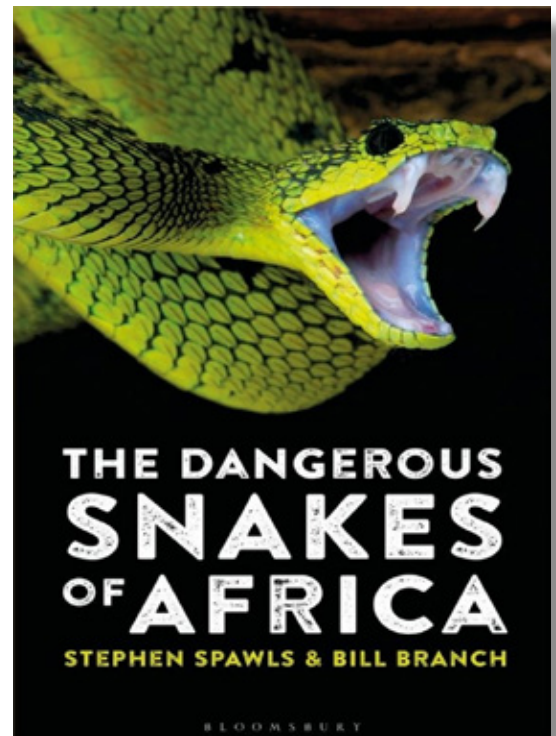
A comprehensive chapter on snakebite, first aid and medical treatment of snakebite in Africa takes up 29 pages.


This excellent book will make a major contribution towards a better understanding of snakes and snakebite in Africa, and is an important reference work for snake enthusiasts, professional herpetologists as well as people who deal with snakebite, especially medical doctors. Another major publishing achievement for Stephen Spawls. His co-author, renowned herpetologist Bill Branch, sadly passed away before the publication of the revised book.

The Dangerous Snakes of Africa is dedicated to Royjan Taylor, a highly respected herpetologist from Bio-Ken in Watamu, Kenya, who did amazing work combatting snakebite in East Africa. Royjan passed away in 2019 – he was 44 years old.

~ **Johan Marais**

Johan Marais is the author of several books including the best-seller *A Complete Guide to the Snakes of Southern Africa*.





Tracks of Kgalagadi Legless Skink
and/or Gariiep Legless Skink in the
Kalahari.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Images and text by **Paul Moler**

Southern Africa boasts an especially rich diversity of fossorial and semi-fossorial skinks, most notably in the genera *Scelotes*, *Acontias*, *Typhlosaurus*, and *Typhlacontias*. Although some species burrow in heavier soils or may be found under rocks on mountaintops, the greatest diversity is found in the soft sands along the coast or in the desert and semi-desert regions. While most are seldom seen due to their secretive habits, many are in fact abundant where they occur. Some species leave distinctive sine wave tracks as they “swim” across loose surface sands

Tracks confirm presence in the area, but they typically indicate only a spot that the lizard passed through earlier. It is usually a waste of time to dig through the sand beneath the tracks. Rather, the best approach is to think like a skink and ask yourself three questions: 1) Where is the loose soil through which the lizards can easily swim or crawl; 2) where is their food; and 3) where is the preferred thermal environment?

Generally speaking, the best soils for catching these skinks are well-drained, soft, and loose enough that you can easily penetrate them to a depth of 5–10 cm with the fingers of your gloved hand. The hand, with fingers spread, is then raked rapidly through the sand while moving the hand side to side. The purpose is

not so much to move soil as it is to filter the lizards from the sand. A common mistake is to dig slowly and gently rather than with gusto. The lizard’s prey items are naturally associated with their own food supply; decaying leaves and other organic matter, and the most productive areas are those blanketed with dead leaves and grass or beneath rocks and logs.

The ideal thermal environment varies throughout the year. During cool weather, patches of dead vegetation exposed to the sun provide a warm microhabitat where the lizard can both feed and thermoregulate. It is during periods of cold weather that mole rat mounds may serve as solar collectors, providing warm soil where the lizards can thermoregulate while

remaining hidden below the surface. During summer, these exposed sites become too hot, forcing the lizards to seek cooler conditions by moving to shaded sites or simply digging deeper. During hot weather, the most productive sites are accumulations of leaf litter in the shade beneath shrubs or other vegetation.

By focusing on soil conditions, accumulated dead organic matter, and seasonally appropriate thermal environments, one can greatly increase the likelihood of finding these secretive lizards. When a skink is briefly exposed by digging, it is best to grab a handful of sand with the lizard, rather than trying to pick up the lizard alone. Some lizards, if grabbed directly, will often drop their tails, whereas lizards embedded in a handful of sand rarely lose their tails. It is helpful to have a small bucket handy into which the sand and skink can be quickly dropped.

A glove is recommended in case one encounters a scorpion or venomous snake. While scratching for skinks, I have dug out a

variety of snakes, including Bibron's Stiletto Snakes (*Atractaspis bibronii*), Namaqua Dwarf Adders (*Bitis schneideri*), Centipede-eaters (*Aparallactus* sp.), an Eastern Purple-Glossed Snake (*Amblyodipsas m. microphthalmma*), a Jan's Shovel-snout (*Prosymna janii*), Herald Snakes (*Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia*), Blind Snakes (*Afrotyphlops* sp.), and Thread Snakes (*Leptotyphlops* sp.).



Above - Dunes in the Namib Desert, home to FitzSimon's Burrowing Skink (*Typhlacontias brevipes* - left) and Brain's Blind Legless Skink (*Typhlosaurus braini* - left below)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Moler is a leading American herpetologist based in Florida. He served for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for more than 30 years. The Wildlife Society created the Paul Moler Herpetological Conservation Award in 2006 in his honour. Paul has published numerous scientific papers across a variety of taxa and authored multiple fieldguides. He has completed more than 20 trips to southern Africa in search of amphibians and reptiles, especially fossorial lizards.



HIBERNATION IN GIANT BULLFROGS

(*Pyxicephalus adspersus*)
Images and text by **Johan Marais**

While conducting a reptile survey in Koanaka Hills, Western Botswana, with Patric Lewis and the team from Sam Houston State University, I came across a piece of a Giant Bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus adspersus*) skull in a pit in the ground. The pit had a diameter of about 5 m and over 1,5 m deep. Giant Bullfrogs had not been recorded from this locality in the past.



Left - The remains of the Giant Bullfrog (*P. adspersus*) found in the pit.



Above - *Monty Thies and Sam Bonge digging in the pit.*

The surface of the pit consisted of cracked clay, and it was clear that the pit held water in the rainy season. With the help of Monty Thies and Sam Bonge we started digging, and the going was tough – the dry clay was very hard. About 25 cm below the surface, we exposed an adult Giant Bullfrog, totally encased in a parchment-like cocoon. It is reported that Bullfrogs can remain in this state underground for several years in the case of severe drought, only emerging with the first rains. After a good rinse, the Bullfrog appeared quite normal and in good condition.



Reference:
Du Preez, L and Carruthers, V.
2017. Frogs of Southern Africa.
Struik Nature. 519 pp.

Left - *Alicia Kennedy and myself with the hibernating Bull Frog.*

Johan Marais is a well-known author of reptile fieldguides and has completed numerous trips across Africa in search of reptiles and amphibians.



Mpumalanga Highlands

~Text and images by Courtney Robert Hundermark

11th January 2020 – Day One

Jolting me up from a seat in the kitchen, hearing the doorbell ringing meant that my good friend Liam Baisley had arrived in Johannesburg after an hour's drive south from Pretoria. We were due to hit the road by around 06h30, so his timing was perfect. After packing Liam's belongings into my car, we headed inside for a quick cup of tea and a catch up.

With pleasantries and a hot cup of tea out of the way, we were ready to leave right on time. Excitement mounting, Liam and I faced a relatively short four-hour drive as we made our way towards our accommodation in the misty mountains near Kwena Dam, Mpumalanga Province, about 300 km away from the concrete jungle of Joburg.

Three hours in we made our first stop – perhaps one of the most important on any trip to the lowveld; Milly's Trout Shop on the N4. Here we ordered breakfast (veggie burgers and rooibos, of course!) and quickly browsed for snacks in the

padstal. With fuel for both humans and vehicle sorted out we resumed our drive north, arriving at our destination little after 11h00. After some recent rains in the area, the dirt road to our accommodation was left soaking, with puddles and mud all over the show – tough going in a 1.2 L hatchback while slipping and sliding, but a fun introduction to the weather conditions we'd be subjected to over the next few days.



Above - Breakfast at Milly's - Veggie burgers and rooibos, of course!



Above - Dirt road to our accommodation.

After unpacking our belongings and bringing them all indoors, we decided where our first opportunity for some herping would lead us. We settled on Lydenburg (Mashishing) and the surrounding areas.

Arriving at 13h00 at a green and misty slope, Liam and I quickly got to work searching for

any interesting creatures. Over the two hours we spent there, we only managed to find two herp species, a Van Son's Gecko (*Pachydactylus vansonii*) and a Variable Skink (*Trachylepis varia*). Bearing in mind this low rate of success, we moved to another location at a higher altitude where we spent the rest of the afternoon enjoying a much wider array of species that we were able to unearth, including some beautiful orchids and arthropods. The herps included Transvaal Girdled Lizard (*Cordylus vittifer*), Mozambican Rain Frog (*Breviceps mossambicus*), Transvaal Dwarf Chameleon (*Bradypodion transvaalense*), Spotted Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus ocellatus*), and the recently described White-Throated Legless Skink (*Acontias albigularis*).



Top left - Transvaal Girdled Lizard, **Top right** - Mozambique Rain Frog, **Bottom left** - White-throated Legless Skink and **Bottom right** - Transvaal Dwarf Chameleon.

With the sun setting and temperatures rapidly dropping, we decided to call it quits and head back south for some supper and sleep, but not without a final stop to search for some reptiles, our target being the Flap-neck Chameleons (*Chamaeleo dilepis*), which are rather abundant in the right places closer to Lydenburg. During a short torchlight search in the trees, we found four individuals, all fast asleep and clutching to their respective branches, only to be woken up by two extremely rude humans shining bright lights in their faces. After snapping some photographs we left them to sleep in peace, arriving back at our accommodation around 21h30.



Above - Liam inspecting a Flap-Neck Chameleon. These large chameleons can be locally abundant. Searching at night with a powerful torch often reveals these cryptic reptiles sleeping on their perch.

12th January 2020 – Day Two

The following day Liam and I set our sights on Graskop and its surrounding mountains. Our targets for this day included Berg Adders (*Bitis atropos*) and Swazi Rock Snake (*Inyoka swazicus*). Both of which I had been fortunate to see multiple times, however would-be lifers for Liam.

After a hearty breakfast of fruit salad and yoghurt we set out north at 09h00. Approaching a bridge over the Crocodile River, with steep embankments leading down off the road and to the river on either side we spotted a large green Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus viridis*). Making a very hasty stop I pulled over to the side of the road, grabbed my Midwest tongs and shoved them into Liam's hands, shouting "Grab him!" By the time I had parked the car Liam had managed to get the Boomslang in the mouth of the tongs, now sitting precariously atop the steep embankment in the long grass. Hook-stick in hand, I made my way a few metres down the embankment hoping to cut off the snake's intended escape route. In the long grass Liam hadn't been able to grab the snake's tail, and it slipped out of the tongs before disappearing. "There! He's here in front of me!" I yelled out, as the snake made a small leap of faith down into the swollen river, swimming across to the other side, which was covered with small trees and some reeds. A search of the riverside yielded no results, a disappointing outcome but certainly a lesson learned... maybe next time.

Egos bruised and mildly despondent, we resumed the drive north towards Graskop, arriving just after 12h00. We hoped to bump into some Berg Adders (*B. atropos*) which I had previously been able to find there.

After an hour and a half of searching in cold and overcast conditions, Liam found our first

reptile for the afternoon, an adult Cross-marked Grass Snake (*Psammophis crucifer*). While I busied myself with getting some cell phone photographs of the Grass Snake, Liam continued searching. "Got one!" exclaimed Liam. Our first, and unfortunately only Berg Adder for the trip. A beautifully marked juvenile with sleek silver and black butterfly-like patterns on its brown body. With the weather worsening, and storm clouds building overhead, Liam quickly took some photos of the Berg Adder. Satisfied with his photographs and suitably shaken by the thunder and lightning, we grabbed our camera gear, released the Berg Adder underneath its original rock, and ran for the safety of the car.



Berg Adder

We headed west to our next location, where we would spend the rest of our afternoon looking for Swazi Rock Snakes (*I. swazicus*). We searched high and low, shoving ourselves under outcrops and overhangs, shining our torches into horizontal crevices, to no avail – the Swazi Rock Snakes continued to evade us despite our best efforts. All was not for naught however, as we discovered a multitude of other reptile species hiding in the crevices including Spotted Dwarf Gecko (*L. ocellatus*), Van Son's Gecko (*P. vansoni*), Wahlberg's Velvet Gecko (*Homopholis wahlbergii*), and Common Crag Lizard (*Pseudocordylus melanotus melanotus*), as well as being treated to some beautiful sightings



Craterostigma wilmsii - Much of the vegetation was in flower in varying shades of white, yellow and pink.

of flowering bulbs and plants.

With sunset fast approaching, we made the drive back south. As we approached our accommodation we saw that the bad weather and rain which we had been spared from earlier in the afternoon while gallivanting up north, had been given free reign further to the south, with trees and leaves blown all over the freshly wet roads. The Crocodile River and the floodplain on either side of it where we had lost the Boomslang (*D. typus viridis*) earlier that day were now completely flooded and flowing perhaps twice as strong as when we last saw it. This made for an interesting drive on the dirt roads back to our lodging, as the muddy conditions only worsened. Thankfully, without much hassle we made it back safely just after 20h00, with a few enjoyable Guttural Toad (*Sclerophrys gutturalis*) sightings on the way back.





Above - Crossing a very small bridge over the flooding Crocodile River. **Above right** - Guttural Toads taking advantage of the wet weather.

After some supper out on the stoep where we were visited by a semi-habituated Small-spotted Genet (*Genetta genetta*) looking for some food scraps, Liam and I made our way down to the trout dams on the property in search of some frogs.



Above - Male Painted Reed Frog calling.



Above - Visit from the Genet

Among the cacophony of shrill mating calls, we found a number of Painted Reed Frogs (*Hyperolius marmoratus taeniatus*), Platannas (*Xenopus laevis*), Bubbling Kassina (*Kassina senegalensis*), Common River Frogs (*Amietia delectandii*), Red Toads (*Schismaderma carens*) and Guttural Toads (*S. gutturalis*), all hopping about in the reeds. We finished off the day with a small Wahlberg's Velvet Gecko (*H. wahlbergii*) seen on a wall indoors, at 22h00.

13th January 2020 – Day Three

Worn out from the previous day's herping we decided to stay close by and spend our day searching for herps on the mountains on the south-eastern side of the property where our accommodation was situated.

In overcast weather we began our ascent at 11h00, aiming to climb all the way up to the plateau, boasting some beautiful cliff faces and kloofs which looked like impeccable habitat for a good number of herps, most exciting of which would be Spotted Rock Snake (*Lamprophis guttatus*). The ascent would involve a climb in elevation of almost 400 metres, from 1400 – 1800 metres above sea level.

With no beaten path to follow the climbing was tough. Reptiles were in short supply with only

a few Wahlberg's Snake-Eyed Skinks (*Panaspis wahlbergii*) to be found on the way up. After a two-hour ascent we reached the plateau which was wonderfully flat and sparsely vegetated.



A good sign?

Before long I managed to find our next reptile species, one of the Thread Snakes (*Leptotyphlops sp.*), tentatively identified as an Incognito Thread Snake (*L. incognitus*), which would be a lifer for both of us if our identification holds true, albeit a rather underwhelming one. After a mildly frustrating photographic session, we let the very wriggly Thread Snake go underneath its original rock and pressed onwards. Unfortunately, this was to be the only herp species we found while atop the mountain and we found another three in quick succession. We decided to focus our efforts elsewhere and moved deeper into some of the kloofs, shining our torches into cliff faces and crevices hoping for some indication of serpentine life, with no luck. At least the views were spectacular and the silence - occasionally interrupted by the calling of birds, frogs, or baboons - was calming. A "bad" day in the field is still better than a good day at work!



Top - Incognito Thread Snake. **Above** - Liam above a rocky kloof.

We headed back down the mountain at around 15h00 finding one more Wahlberg's Snake-Eyed Skink (*P. wahlbergii*), followed by a beautiful Transvaal Girdled Lizard (*C. vittifer*) - a decent way to end the afternoon. By 16h30, we arrived back at the house, ready to relax.

Later that evening, we searched for some Wahlberg's Velvet Geckos (*H. wahlbergii*) on the outer walls of the house. After photographing one of them we decided to get an early night's sleep.



Above - Wahlberg's Velvet Geckos (*Homopholis wahlbergii*)

14th January 2020 – Day Four

Another crisp morning in Mpumalanga. Excited to head back into the world outside, Liam and I once again set our intentions on Graskop and some of the nearby mountains, hoping to see some more Berg Adders (*B. atropos*), as well as bouncing around the idea of bumping into a Spotted Rock Snake (*L. guttatus*) – wishful thinking.

We arrived at our first location shortly after 12h20 and equipped ourselves for the afternoon ahead, jackets and camera bags in tow.

Slowly making our way up the slope we soon began finding several herps in their respective hidey holes. The first of these was a small but very feisty Herald Snake (*Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia*), followed by multiple Montane Dwarf Burrowing Skinks (*Scelotes mirus*), one of which we decided to photograph. Next up was a brightly marked Transvaal Girdled Lizard (*C. vittifer*), displaying some vibrant orange colouration around the eye, as specimens from Mpumalanga are well known for.

To the east, in the valley below us, a thick blanket of mist was looming, slowly engulfing the countryside from view like something out of a Stephen King novel. It looked far enough away and we assumed it would either dissipate with the heightening of the sun or move off in another direction.



We continued our search soon finding our first amphibian for the day, a delightfully plump Guttural Toad (*S. gutturalis*). Shortly thereafter I started searching in between some boulders in a large outcrop. Flipping over a medium-sized rock in front of me I unearthed a small, slender-looking snake almost caramel brown in colour, and curled up into a near perfect circle. I must have stared at it for a few moments before muttering to myself, “Don’t mess with me...”. I had a hunch as to what snake this might be, but I couldn’t quite bring myself to believe it. Picking the snake up in my hands I yelled “Swazicus! Swazicus!” and Liam came rushing over to see the spectacle for himself. Sure enough, we had done it – we managed to find the one snake that comes in above all else in this part of the world, a Swazi Rock Snake (*I. swazicus*). Liam and I must have spent ten minutes with the snake in hand, just staring at it and watching it move, flicking its tongue in and out. Eventually, we regained some sense of composure and agreed to get our cameras out in order to photograph this elusive find. Liam went first. Satisfied with his photographs, I then followed suit.



Above - Myself with the Swazi Rock Snake.

Left - Montane Dwarf Burrowing Skink (*Scelotes mirus*)



Above - Success! Swazi Rock Snake (*Inyoka swazicus*)

At this point, the mist that we'd chosen to ignore earlier in the afternoon was about to completely engulf us, and with it came the rain. Impeccable timing – just our luck. Hastily we packed up our camera gear, donned our jackets and hats, said our goodbyes to the Swazi Rock Snake which had made our final day in the highlands so very exciting. Being sure to let it curl up underneath the same rock where it was found we then made our exit for the shelter of the car.



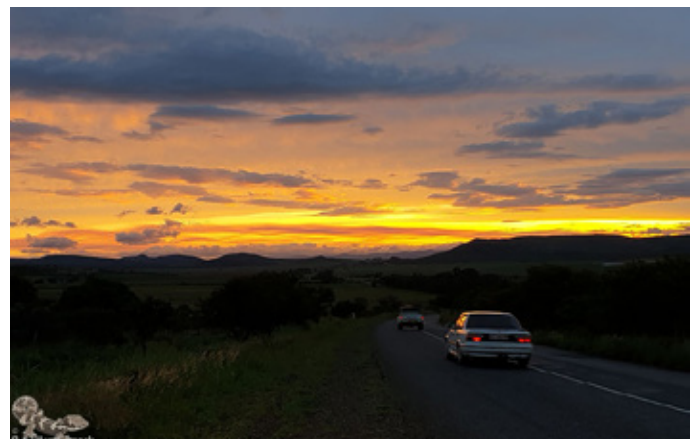
two Mozambican Rain Frogs (*B. mossambicus*) along with the usual arthropods and flowering plants. Shortly after 18h15 we hit the road and headed south, back to our accommodation.

After an uneventful drive back save for a beautiful, golden sunset outside Lydenburg, we arrived at our accommodation around 20h00. After supper we performed one last torchlight search on the walls of the house, both indoors and outdoors, to see how many Wahlberg's Velvet Geckos (*H. wahlbergii*) were hanging around before getting some sleep.

Left - Two rain soaked herpers hiding under the boot of their car.

Below - Sunset near Lydenburg.

We headed back in the direction from which we came, in hopes of passing through the storm and finding a spot where it wasn't raining, so we could still get some herping done. We ended up at one of the same locations from a few days prior and retraced our steps from that previous search. During the two hours spent there we managed to find a juvenile Van Son's Gecko (*P. vansoni*), a male Wahlberg's Snake-Eyed Skink (*P. wahlbergii*) with a bright orange ventrum, and



15th January 2020 – Day Five

Waking up at 06h00 and aiming to be ready to drive back to Gauteng by 07h00, Liam and I enjoyed most of our last morning in Mpumalanga on the stoep, eating breakfast and drinking tea while taking in our surroundings.

By 07h00 we were on the dirt roads leading to the R36 heading home. Most of the mud had dried up by now and as a result had left massive dongas all over the place, which made for some interesting driving. In a stroke of bad luck, I hit one of these, significantly denting the rim of my front left tyre. No field trip is complete without a few mishaps and technical difficulties, and after a brief tyre change, we were again on our way. We arrived back in Johannesburg at around 11h00.

Reptiles (17 species):

1. Berg Adder (*Bitis atropos*)
2. Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus viridis*)
3. Common Crag Lizard (*Pseudocordylus melanotus melanotus*)
4. Cross-marked Grass Snake (*Psammophis crucifer*)
5. Flap-neck Chameleon (*Chamaeleo dilepis*)
6. Herald Snake (*Crotaphopeltis hotamboeia*)
7. Incognito Thread Snake (*Leptotyphlops incognitus*)
8. Montane Dwarf Burrowing Skink (*Scelotes mirus*)
9. Spotted Dwarf Gecko (*Lygodactylus ocellatus*)
10. Swazi Rock Snake (*Inyoka swazicus*)
11. Transvaal Dwarf Chameleon (*Bradypodion transvaalense*)
12. Transvaal Girdled Lizard (*Cordylus vittifer*)
13. Van Son's Gecko (*Pachydactylus vansoni*)
14. Variable Skink (*Trachylepis varia*)
15. Wahlberg's Snake-Eyed Skink (*Panaspis wahlbergii*)
16. Wahlberg's Velvet Gecko (*Homopholis wahlbergii*)
17. White-Throated Legless Skink (*Acontias albigularis*)

Amphibians (7 species):

1. Bubbling Kassina (*Kassina senegalensis*)
2. Common River Frog (*Amietia delelandii*)
3. Guttural Toad (*Sclerophrys gutturalis*)
4. Mozambican Rain Frog (*Breviceps mossambicus*)
5. Painted Reed Frog (*Hyperolius marmoratus taeniatus*)
6. Platanna (*Xenopus laevis*)
7. Red Toad (*Schismaderma carens*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtney Hundermark was born in the Eastern Cape. As a child, in between finding Dwarf Chameleons and geckos in the garden, he would spend time at the snake park and museum at Bayworld, where his love for herpetology began. Courtney has studied photography and is currently studying towards a Diploma in Nature Conservation through UNISA. He has volunteered on research projects on Tortoise monitoring in the Karoo as well as with the Western Leopard Toad group (ToadNUTs). He spends as much time as possible in the field, searching for and photographing reptiles and amphibians in the far-flung reaches of the country.

AFRICAN REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Breeding Records

Rhombic Egg-eater (*Dasypeltis scabra*) ~ Johan Marais

Females produce 6–25 eggs (27-46 x 15-20 mm) in summer (Marais, 2004). A female from Springbok, Namaqualand, produced three eggs on 01 January measuring 40 x 12,5; 43 x 12,5 and 45 x 12,5 mm. They were incubated at 27 degrees °C and hatched 73 days later. The young measured 21,5 cm, 22,2 cm and 23,5 cm (total length).

The same female laid a further three eggs on 7 March measuring 43 x 17, 47 x 16 and 47,6 x 16,3 mm.

Reference

Marais, J. 2004. Complete Guide to Snake of Southern Africa. Struik Publishers. 312 pp.



Ocellated Gecko (*Pachydactylus geitje*) ~ Johan Marais

Females produce 2 eggs measuring 8-9,5 x 7-8 mm (Branch, 1998). A female produced two eggs on 6 November measuring 9,2 x 7,2 and 9,1 x 7,2 mm.

Reference

Branch B. 1998. A Field Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa. Struik Publishers. 399 pp.



Braack's Pygmy Gecko (*Goggia braacki*) ~ Johan Marais

Females produce two small eggs that are laid under sun-warmed rock flakes (Branch, 1998). On 6 November a female produced two eggs measuring 9 x 6,4 and 9 x 6,2 mm.

Reference

Branch B. 1998. A Field Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa. Struik Publishers. 399 pp.



Delalandi's Sandveld Lizard (*Nucras lalandii*) ~ Johan Marais

Females lay 3–9 eggs measuring 9-13 x 14–21 mm (Branch, 1998). A female from Nottingham Road, KwaZulu-Natal Midlands laid 11 eggs measuring 15,9 x 12; 17 x 12,8; 16,2 x 12,8; 16,6 x 12; 16 x 13; 17,8 x 12,2; 15,2 x 12,3; 16,2 x 13; 14,9 x 9,8; 16,8 x 13,2 and 15,8 x 12 mm.

Nine eggs hatched and the hatchlings measured 34,9 + 51,1; 33,9 + 47; 35,2 + 50; 34,8 + 48,4; 33,2 + 51,7; 32,3 + 47; 33 + 52; 34,1 + 50 and 33 + 48,4 mm.

Reference

Branch B. 1998. A Field Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa. Struik Publishers. 399 pp.



FINDING MR. PÉRINGUEY

Text and images by Randy Babb

I have spent my life working as a biologist in Arizona's Sonoran Desert, and for my first visit to Southern Africa I was most interested in seeing arid land ecological equivalents to those species living in the U.S. Convergent evolution is a familiar theme between the southwestern United States and southern Africa; columnar Euphorbias and columnar cacti, aloes and agaves, and of course the myriad of arid-land animals. I have always been intrigued by nature's solutions to problems, and that though there may be several answers to a particular challenge, there is often only one best answer. The result being organisms with totally different lineages

Below - Estimated at 55 million years old, the Namib Desert is the world's oldest desert.



looking remarkably similar.

The great Namib Desert is older than any of North America's deserts by millions of years. It supports many more endemic species. The three warm deserts in the United States, the Mohave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan, are only about 9,500 years old and when compared to the estimated 55 million years old Namib are mere infants. Simply put, life in the Namib has had a lot more time to evolve and speciate under the pressures of sand, aridity and heat. For example, in the deserts of the southwestern United States we have five species of sand specialist lizards, all in the genus *Uma*. They have wedge shaped snouts, countersunk jaws, flaps of skin that fold back and cover the ear openings, smooth granular scales, and prominent fringes on the toes of the hind feet. They are highly specialized for life in dunes. Whereas southern Africa has numerous species of lizards of several genera and even in different families, sporting either some or all of these adaptations. In North America we have shovel-nosed snakes (*Chionactis sp.*), small fossorial, "sand swimming", dune dwelling snakes whose niche in southern Africa is filled by legless fossorial skinks (see article by Paul Moler).

And when it comes to mammals like the golden mole (family Chrysochloridae), well, there isn't anything like that in the dune fields of the Southwestern United States.



Above - FitzSimon's Burrowing Skink
(*Typhlacontias brevipes*)

Of the many animals that populated my "must see" list, Péringuey's Adder (*Bitis peringueyi*) was right near the top. Its resemblance to Sidewinders (*Crotalus cerastes*), a small rattlesnake common to the Mohave and Sonoran deserts, made it of particular interest. Of the 13 species of rattlesnakes found in Arizona, about half inhabit woodlands and grasslands, while most of the six low elevation species favor rocky desert slopes. Only the Western Diamond Back (*Crotalus atrox*), Mohave (*Crotalus scutulaus*) and Sidewinder utilize desert flats but only the Sidewinder is known to inhabit active dune fields and is arguably the most specialized of all North American rattlesnakes. Admittedly, Sidewinders are not nearly as specialized as Péringuey's Adders. The Sidewinders are a much more plastic species that are quite common on desert flats and hardpan or rocky, alluvial plains. In fact, the Horned Adder (*Bitis caudalis*), most closely resembles the Sidewinder in general appearance. But for behavior and adaptation to arid environs, Péringuey's Adder and the Sidewinder are brother taxon linked by life in the sands.

It had been ten days of rough back roads, remote beautiful landscapes, biltong, and Nucha Gonzalch's Land Rover: a machine that sucked dust (into the cab) with more efficiency than any vacuum cleaner I had ever seen. We had seen over 50 species of reptiles and amphibians, countless invertebrates, birds and mammals all new to me. I was with my longtime friend Paul Moler and my new friends Johan Marais and Nucha Gonzalch. It was 1995, my first trip to Africa and though only at its midpoint, was already an epic venture.



Above - Dunes around Swakopmund

We had arrived in Swakopmund the day before, as a heavy fog engulfed the town. It was here near the northern terminus of the Southern Sand Sea we hoped to see Péringuey's Adders. The following morning we were bumping about town and by noon all of us were keen to refocus on more important things: finding snakes. We headed south out of town, stopping at likely looking spots all of which showed signs of heavy off-road vehicle use. None of us really had much, if any, experience looking for this small snake, but we all had a pretty good idea of what conditions this species might favor. We next moved to a more vegetated area, each of us going our own way as we wondered the dunes. The strong winds had erased nearly all animal tracks, but Johan did find a short trail of a tortoise and I a few meters

of a sidwinding snake track. A lengthy search here yielded only the loosely constructed twig nests of whistling rats and a few small lizards. Our next stop produced FitzSimon's Burrowing Skink (*Typhlacontias brevipes*) found by digging near the base of shrubs. They were a delight; lithesome and beautiful with blue tails. Though I don't recall, I am pretty sure Paul must have found most of these skinks. He has uncanny digging powers. Aardvarks watch with envy as Paul digs. The remainder of the fading day was spent sorting out how to get into different spots and wandering the dunes and sand fields till dark, without finding the snake of interest. Discouraged, we headed back to town. The evening was spent strategizing. Should we call it quits and head north or give it another try? We had all put in a good deal of effort, and defeat weighed heavily upon us.

We were up early and after a spartan breakfast of tea and rusks we headed afield. We selected what we thought to be a promising area and again each headed our own way into the dunes. Johan made his way across the gravel plains toward the inland dunes while the rest of us elected to search the more vegetated costal dunes. We wandered along, not far from each other, heading into the dune field. It was not 20 minutes before Paul called out, gesturing to a nice-sized Péringuey's Adder resting at the crest of a vegetated sand hummock. There it was - the snake I had seen in dozens of books and traveled so far to find. Small and tan, with small eyes perched high on its head. We were just starting our search and already found what we were looking for.

We split up, I headed south working the sunny interface where the dunes grade into the gravel plain while Paul and Nucha worked north. We have all had those days when, for whatever reason, fortune smiles upon us. Though I would

adamantly deny it to my field companions, success is had not through any great skill or knowledge but rather just plain good luck. Today was my lucky day. The first snake I found was outstretched beneath a low shrub near the crest of a small dune. Behind it was a shallow circular depression where it had spent the night. It lay there unthreatening in all its snakey glory. A small sand colored walleyed snake. Almost insignificant when compared to many of its relatives. I had traveled over 16,000 km to see it and inhaled what felt like a metric ton of dust, and I was nearly giddy with excitement.



Above - Péringuey's Adders

The finding of this first snake informed my search and in the next hour and a half I averaged a snake every 30 minutes. My next adder was laying partially exposed on an east facing slope face just below the crest of a small dune. It hissed, fled, and buried itself beneath a shrub when I approached. The next snake was completely buried along the southward edge of a low dune. I noticed some obscure tracks which I took to be those of a burrowing skink. When I raked through the sand a hissing adder erupted from the soil. My final snake came when I noticed a very faint and familiar track heading up the dune I was standing on. If I was in the dunes of western Arizona, I would have known that a sidewinder had recently passed this way. I prodded around in the vegetation without results then retraced

my steps where I found the snake partially buried along the crest right next to one of my footprints. The displacement of sand from my step had revealed the snake.

When I returned to the vehicle my friends were waiting for me. Paul had found another adder by following a set of fresh tracks to the animal. Johan also found a snake by following its track. In all, we found seven Péringuey's Adders in about two hours of searching. We all had opportunities to photograph these amazing little snakes and though I would see many other wonderful creatures in the days to come, I don't think any captivated me as much as meeting Mr. Péringuey.

Below - Péringuey's Adders and the dunefield habitat they occupy.



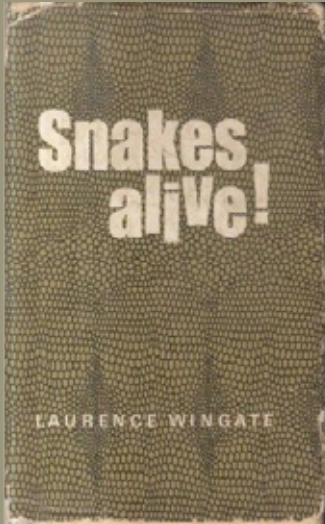
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randy has more than 30 year's experience working for the Arizona Game and Fish Department. He is one of Arizona's leading naturalists and has expertise in botany, mammalogy, ornithology, and, above all, herpetology. He has done several trips to Africa and Vietnam as well as around America. Randy has published extensively on everything from birds to arachnids as well identification guides to fishes, amphibians, and reptiles. He is also an exceptional artist and illustrator and a top photographer.



Snakes Alive!

A look at the life of Laurence Wingate, a 20th century pioneer of herpetology in the Cape



Text by Craig Napier

I have always been fascinated by the early pioneers of herpetology from the 20th century. Names such as FW Fitzsimons and son VFM Fitzsimons, RM Isemonger, Walter Rose and CJP Ionides are some that come to mind. All these past legends wrote books, so that we are able to know a little about their lives and exploits, but my personal favourite is Laurence Wingate whose book *Snakes Alive!* I have read numerous times since I was still in primary school. I grew up in the Cape and I readily relate to the areas he mentions and am fascinated by his account of life back then before everything got so built up and snakes were more plentiful than they are today.

I remember when I was about 15 years old, I looked up Mr Wingate's telephone number in the directory and plucked up the courage to phone him. He was friendly, but discouraged me from catching snakes, especially venomous ones. It was good advice, which as a teenager I completely ignored! He gave me a tip though which, a year or two after, saved me from a possible bite by a Cape Cobra (*Naja nivea*). He explained that when pulling a Mole Snake (*Pseudaspis cana*) out of a hole by the tail they will not ever turn around on you. The Cape Cobra however is different. They do turn around inside the tunnel whilst being grasped by the tail to confront the attacker. So, whilst on my own one day when looking for snakes I came

across a dark brown Cobra some distance away. As I came near, it darted down a gerbil hole and I grabbed the last part of the tail. Whilst trying to maintain a grip, the warning of Mr Wingate came to mind. The loose sand had closed around the body of the snake, but suddenly I saw the sand open and a nose and mouth gaped wide as the angry snake lunged at me. I anticipated it and let go of the tail in a split second and stepped back out of harm's way. Needless to say, the snake got away, but I am eternally grateful for the sound advice given by someone who had the experience of catching thousands of snakes.

Early life

Laurence Wingate was born in Sunninghill Road, Wynberg on 15 June 1908 to parents Edwin and Mildred Wingate. His parents were married before they arrived in South Africa from England, most likely to seek opportunity in the Cape and enjoy the sunny weather. Laurence was the youngest of four children, with a considerable gap of 16 years between him and his eldest sister Ruby. Siblings Stanley and Doreen followed in between. Laurence grew up in a very religious household, and his family belonged to the Plymouth Brethren which was a small but rather strict church group that developed into a sect many years later. Laurence's earliest years were spent in the fairly new and developing suburb of Fish Hoek. In those days it was mostly sand dunes with larger houses starting to be built amongst the mainly primitive holiday huts, as even at that time, it was a popular beach resort. He was fascinated with snakes from a very young age, which were very common in the area.

The family moved back to Wynberg, where Laurence attended Wynberg Boys Junior School. He was always fond of the outdoors, and used to spend much time collecting chameleons, lizards, spiders and bats. At age 13, and the equivalent of today's Grade 8 at Wynberg Boys High, his life changed forever. He was taught Biology by the well-known herpetologist and Scout master of the 1st Claremont Scout Group at the time, Cyril French. Mr French was by all accounts a large man with a thick black moustache and stern face. Cyril kindled the schoolboy's passion for snakes and taught him all he knew. They did many snake catching expeditions together, mainly on the Cape Flats which was still wild and undeveloped, unlike today where there are only very few isolated pockets of pristine areas still to be found.

Laurence was not a good student, and left school after today's equivalent of grade 8, probably 14

or 15 years old at the time. His first job was as a motor mechanic apprentice, but this did not last long as he made a mechanical blunder on one of the cars and was promptly fired. Although Cyril French was at one time dating Laurence's sister, their expeditions and companionship came to an end when Cyril left South Africa to take up a post at the Adelaide Snake Park in Australia. It was only a few months later that French succumbed on 27th April 1927, at the age of 41 to the bite of an Australian Tiger Snake (*Notechis sp.*).



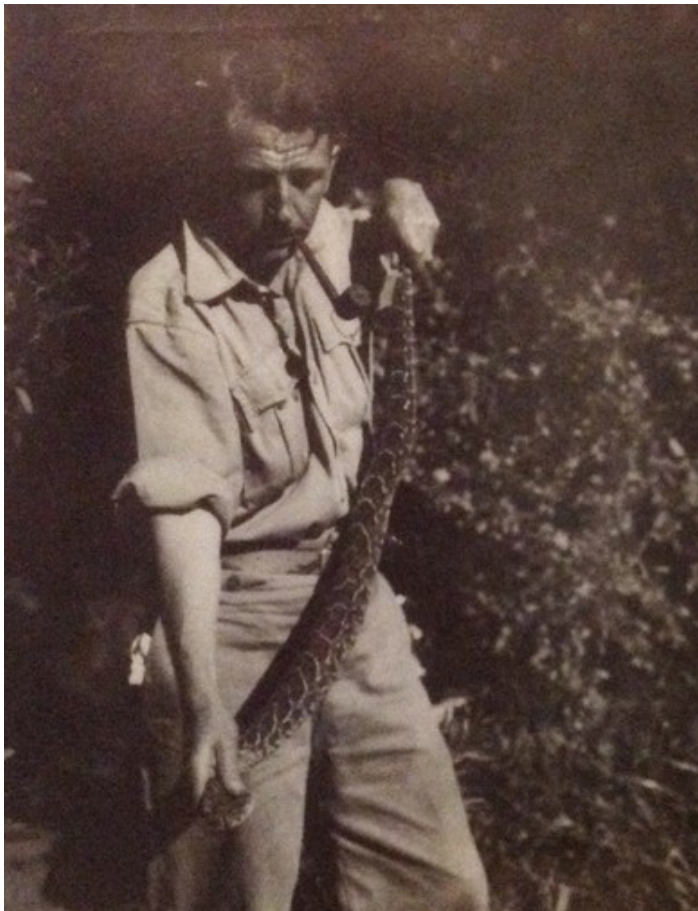
Above - Laurence Wingate as a young man. Probably about 22 years old.

His Life with snakes

Laurence Wingate devoted a large part of his life to working with snakes. His interest started when he was at school, where he spent many hours catching and keeping snakes, much to his family's dismay. His parents were not at all in favour of his hobby and this caused many problems in his household.

He spent at least 10 years working at the Cape Town Snake Park which was located in the Foreshore area of Cape Town at the time. During this time, he did a lot of milking of snakes for anti-venom which was in big demand at the time as this technology was still quite new.

In 1939, the owner of the snake park Bertie Peers, died tragically after being bitten by a Cape Cobra whilst doing a snake demonstration. Bertie's wife Gwen continued running the park for a short while after that, but then it closed down.



Above - A firm grip on a Puff Adder, probably caught in Simonstown area. Pipe as always in mouth.

Wingate loved the outdoor life, so he spent much time in the field looking for and catching snakes. His favourite area was the Cape Flats, especially Princess Vlei region. Rocklands Farm just past Simonstown at Froggy Pond was another place where he caught many Puff Adders (*Bitis arietans*), as they are common in this area. His accounts of Rinkhals (*Hemachatus haemachatus*) being

common on the Cape Flats are most interesting, as they are virtually extinct there today. In the early 1960s he did a trip to Kenilworth Racecourse with his son Gerald, where he caught 3 Rinkhals in one day. But they are most likely extinct there now too.

He was only once bitten by a venomous snake

Laurence was an extremely good and careful snake handler. He was only once bitten by a venomous snake and at the time he wasn't even out catching snakes! The incident occurred when he was out at a picnic with some friends and whilst clutching at some grass when climbing up an embankment he inadvertently grabbed onto a Spotted Harlequin Snake (*Homoroselaps lacteus*) and was bitten. The envenomation must have been quite severe, as he experienced pain and discomfort for months after.

Although Laurence didn't directly contribute to any scientific journals, he did help others with research. In particular Walter Rose, who practiced as a dentist, but was a well-known herpetologist in the Cape. He was a frequent visitor to the Cape Town Snake Park to get advice as well as study the behaviour of various reptile species. Walter Rose has been credited with discovering at least five frog species in the Cape.

Personal life

Laurence Wingate suffered from many health problems throughout his life. His main affliction was asthma which he developed at a young age. This however did not stop him from an almost lifelong pipe smoking habit and being in the outdoors as much as possible, frequently hiking on Table Mountain and in the area of the

southern tip of the Cape Peninsula.

Laurence married Hendrika Eeltjies (Riek for short) on 4th October 1941 in Senekal in the Free State, where they had moved after his parents had passed away. He found the inland drier climate easier on his asthmatic condition.

After a few years of living in Senekal, where Riek worked at the local hospital and Laurence as a dental technician, they moved to Kendrew, which is a very small town in the Karoo, Eastern Cape. They owned and operated a guest farm and both children Gwen (12th February 1947) and Gerald (6th March 1948) were born there. When the children were due to go to school, they moved to Boksburg in the Transvaal. It was during this time and whilst Riek was on holiday in the Cape with the two children that Laurence Wingate was involved in a serious motorcycle accident. He sustained major head injuries and was in a coma for some months. At one stage it was doubtful that he would pull through. This was a time of extreme hardship for the family. Riek had to take a night shift nursing job in order to earn enough money to sustain the family. Gwen and Gerald initially stayed with friends for 6 months and then at the Marsh Memorial Home in Rondebosch for 12 months.

After Laurence was discharged from hospital, he was not able to care for himself, and his sister

Below - The Wingate family when they resided in Boksburg.



Ruby relocated to Johannesburg to nurse him back to health, a process which took many months. He suffered the aftereffects of memory loss and epileptic fits which forced him to give up driving and motorcycling. In 1956 Laurence relocated back to Cape Town uniting the whole family again.

Although he much preferred life in the Cape, Wingate's asthma continued to plague him and during the winter of 1966 it became so bad that he was forced to temporarily relocate to Touwsrivier for 6 months.

Other incidents that caused suffering later in life include a self-inflicted gunshot through the foot when very young, a fall from a wind pump; damaging his shoulder, as well as the Harlequin Snake bite all caused varying degrees of discomfort, especially during colder weather. He also suffered from a mild heart condition and was fitted with a pacemaker near the end of his life.

Laurence Wingate succumbed to his ill health and old age on 25th July 1986 at the age of 78.

Below - Laurence with the two children Gerald and Gwen. Picture probably taken early in the 1950's. Interesting dress style and the binoculars already around Gerald's neck.



His book “Snakes Alive”

Laurence Wingate’s book titled “Snakes Alive” is a fascinating and an enjoyable read. Published in 1967 by Howard Timmins, it is written in a very easy style and one does not need to be a snake lover to appreciate this book. What makes this book even more remarkable is that Laurence only had the equivalent of Grade 8 education, but he was still able to pen such a delightful tale. Not only does the book describe very interesting stories and facts about snakes, but it gives one a very good idea of what life was like at the time, especially in the Cape.

The late John Visser’s critical analysis of the book at the time was “The book is just a casual collection of anecdotes and of no value as a reference book for an amateur naturalist or herpetologist.” Laurence Wingate purportedly replied “Exactly, it is not about the snakes. It’s about the experience of catching them.”

This was probably what made the book so popular at the time. Whilst it does give many facts about snakes, it is a feel good and interesting read.

The Kenilworth Racecourse Rinkhals expedition

This is verbatim account written by his son, Gerald, who accompanied Laurence on the field expedition.

“Kenilworth racecourse was plagued with dune mole rats excavating underground tunnels that were located by the typical molehills of fresh sand dotting their territory. These tunnels were a threat to the racehorses that could break a leg if tripped at full gallop. The racecourse management decided to introduce some large mole snakes to eliminate the mole rat problem. This was done, but after a few years, no improvement could be noticed. This is when they requested that my dad should pay a visit and possibly shed some light on the matter.

In December 1963 my dad and I arrived at the racecourse and assessed the venue with regards to potential influences entering or leaving the property. The outside perimeter consisted of a solid wall that would prevent any small animals from readily entering or exiting the racecourse. The only possibility of movement would be through the gap under the broad main entrance gate. However, access to this locality would require the animals to cover a large piece of tarmac where they would be very exposed to observation or predation.

There is an extensive tract of natural vegetation in the centre of the course. We took a slow walk around this potential refuge of small creatures. Suddenly my dad signalled that he had spotted something and that I must freeze. He deftly took off his backpack and donned his goggles to counter a possible jet of finely sprayed venom. I immediately realised that he had found a Rinkhals. I did not have goggles, so I had to hang back and observe.

*He missed his target and the serpent,
which took exception to the intrusion,
did a sudden u-turn and raised his
hood as he headed towards my dad.*

The large Rinkhals had been basking on the track in the morning summer sun and, when it noticed us, sped off towards the shelter of the bushes. My dad rushed after it and took a swipe with his snake stick. He missed his target and the serpent, which took exception to the intrusion, did a sudden u-turn and raised his hood as he headed towards my dad. The interaction was a flurry of feet and coils, ending with the snake being pinned down by a rather pale looking dad. He reached down to pick the snake up and gave a loud gasp when he realised that he had a grip on the underside of

the head.

Once the snake was safely in a bag my dad explained to me that, when threatened, the Rinkhals feigns dead by turning belly up. In the excitement my dad forgot that he had removed his spectacles in order to wear his goggles. He had not seen clearly enough to notice the inverted head of the Rinkhals. After a short break to gather our wits we continued our patrol, which proved to be eventful with the capture of three Spotted Skaapstekers and a further two specimens of Rinkhals.

Dad decided to take the snakes to John Wood who was supplying the venom for the making of serum. On arrival at John's farm we placed the six bags on the table. When queried we sheepishly admitted that we did not know which bags contained the three Rinkhals. Without hesitation John gave the contents of each bag a sharp tap. The bags containing the Rinkhals changed shape quickly as they instinctively raised the front quarter of their bodies to be ready to spit at the antagonist.

The discovery of Rinkhals at the racecourse was quite a surprise as this species had become all but extinct on the Cape Flats. John and Dad surmised that the solid wall surrounding the racecourse had prevented the snakes from leaving the venue. The natural vegetation and pools of both rainwater and irrigation water provided refuge for many small creatures that would be food for the snakes. The large introduced mole snakes were expected to multiply and provide many offspring to deal with the mole rats. However, the baby mole snakes made ideal prey items for the adult Rinkhals which, in turn, would now thrive and control the population expansion of mole snakes."

Anecdotes

Wingate had rather a colourful life of which many tales are accounted in his book 'Snakes Alive.' Herewith are some interesting stories which are not mentioned in the book.

Whilst Wingate was at school, he befriended the Smith brothers, all of whom were fond of using a catapult to shoot at anything of interest, like streetlights. When they were in high school, they earned pocket money and bought themselves an airgun or .22 rifle. Laurence was a very good shot and enjoyed competing with his friends.

At this time the squirrels introduced from England were raiding the local farmers' fruit and nut trees. The rodents had become such a pest that a bounty was placed on their heads. A squirrel's tail could be redeemed for cash at the local police station.

Mr Shaw, a Wynberg farmer, heard of Laurence's shooting prowess and engaged him to eradicate the squirrels on his property. Mr Shaw would provide the bullets knowing that Wingate would eliminate a dozen squirrels with the dozen bullets provided. Laurence would show his bounty to Mr Shaw before taking the tails to the police station to collect his pocket money.

Despite Laurence Wingate's almost lifelong health problems, it amused him that he outlived all his 'heathy friends' that were continuously remonstrating with him about his lack of concern for his own health. In fact, Riek sadly passed away before him and he remarried to Rio Dorothy Riley on his birthday 15th June 1984.

A very close friend of Laurence Wingate's, whose name was not mentioned at all in his book, was a character by the name of Pat Gilmore. They were together at both Wynberg Boys Junior and High Schools. They were almost the polar opposites of each other, which was probably why they remained lifelong friends. For instance, Pat was a large and tough guy that always had the back in protecting his smaller companion. Pat was of

Irish origin and had a lively personality and was an eloquent conversationist. Laurence was more introverted by comparison. Laurence left school after Standard 6, whereas Pat not only completed his schooling but went on to qualify as a Civil Engineer at the University of Cape Town. He was involved in many prestigious engineering projects, including the design and construction of Ou Kaapse Weg.

The two friends were both accomplished banjo players and always drew a crowd when they started playing their duets. Pat Gilmore was a constant source of invigoration and encouragement to his friend, especially in helping with his numerous setbacks due to his poor health.

Below - Laurence Wingate in his latter years. In this instance swapping banjo for guitar.



Epilogue

I am fortunate to be firm friends with Mr Wingate's son Gerald, from whom I got much information, in assisting to write this article, as well as exclusive access to many photographs. Although Gerald is interested in reptiles and amphibians, he did not follow in his father's footsteps in this regard. However, with the love of nature implanted in him from a very young age, Gerald developed a keen interest in birds and is one of the Cape's top bird watchers. He is also involved in bird ringing for research purposes.

Laurence Wingate and Walter Rose were acquaintances back in the day, so it is not too strange that Gerald was good friends with Barrie Rose, the grandson of Walter. Barrie was also a well-known birder in the Cape, until his tragic and untimely death a few years ago.

The book *Snakes Alive* is long out of print, but copies are still available second hand on Amazon or from other book dealers. It is well worth procuring as an excellent read and a fine addition to any book collection.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Craig Napier has been interested in reptiles since age 11. Growing up in Cape Town he spent many afternoons and weekends hunting snakes in Milnerton and surrounding areas instead of doing school homework. He also developed a passion for bird watching a few years later. Craig enjoys just spending time in the bush, appreciating the wonders and beauty of nature. He now resides in Gauteng where he still pursues his hobbies on an amateur basis as often as possible.





Searching for the Rwenzori Helmeted Chameleon (*Kinyongia carpenteri*)

Text and images by **Johan Marais**

While attending the World Herpetological Conference in Cape Town back in 2005, I got chatting to my good friend Colin Tilbury about chameleons and he mentioned that he was heading to the Rwenzori Mountains in Uganda to look for the elusive Rwenzori Helmeted Chameleon (*Kinyongia carpenteri*). It was described by Parker back in 1929 and is rare in museum collections.

A few days later we were both on flight SA206, heading for Entebbe airport in Uganda. It was a pleasant flight and we had a lot to chat about. Flying into Entebbe over Lake Victoria is spectacular, with lots of little islands.

We were transferred to Kampala and Colin asked the driver whether he was a racing driver! There, we rented a Toyota Sprinter with air-conditioning and headed for Mbarara. The roads were not too bad, lined with fruit and vegetable stands,

loads of people, taxis, bicycles and 125 cc motorcycles. Colin did the driving and he did a darn good job, considering how fearless the local drivers were. We stopped for a dozen bananas and two cooked mealies and that cost us Sh450 (R1.80). We saw many cars with fish tied to their front grills, and eventually came across the fish sellers. They were selling catfish, which they had caught with a line and earthworms as bait, and lots of big Tilapia, some around 4 – 5 kg! These sold for about Sh5000 (R20.00) each and were netted.

In 2005, South African Rand (ZAR) 1 = Ugandan Shilling (UGX) 251 approximately.

We ended up in the Pelican Hotel in Mbarara close to 22:00 and just made it for dinner, which consisted of very oily chicken and chips (Colin ended up with fish and chips) at Sh4,500 (R18) each. The dining room was poorly lit and rather primitive, like something out of the 60s in South Africa. Accommodation cost Sh30,000 (R120) each and we had adequate rooms, each with a TV that didn't work, and eventually, no running water.



Left - Street butcher. **Right** - Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleon, a common species in Uganda.

Below - Before the climb. Geared up and ready to go.

We later took a walk down the street outside the hotel and saw one or two Tropical House Geckos (*Hemidactylus cf. mabouia*) but they disappeared very quickly. I managed to get one specimen to photograph.

Breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs on toast, pork sausages (managed to eat one!) and fruit – pawpaw, watermelon and pineapple, and Star coffee. The coffee tin looked as if it should contain sardines. We then headed out for Kasese and Fort Portal.

We stopped at a hedge next to the main road and Colin (despite having an upset stomach) quickly found two male Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleons (*Trioceros ellioti*). It is a beautiful green chameleon the size of the Natal Midlands Dwarf Chameleon (*Bradypodion thamnobates*). They were both 1.2 – 1.5 m off the ground on the sunny side of

the hedge. Colin was very quick to spot the chameleons – I had a really good look but couldn't spot any.

482 km later we arrived in Kasese. We stopped a few times and scratched around, but it was very hot and too dry – around 29°C. On the way, we photographed baboon, Kob (their version of Waterbuck, which looks a bit like an Impala), Crowned Crane, purple-coloured Loerie with yellow beaks, and what looked

like a Narina Trogon (not that I can tell a budgie from a vulture). At the Green Garden restaurant at the Saad Hotel in Kasese, we had goat stew with rice and matooki (cooked green banana). 563 km in, we were at the Rwenzori Travelers Inn in Fort Portal. We enjoyed a coffee on the verandah and watched the Marabou Storks raiding garbage dumps.

We were up early the next morning, purchased some provisions for our trip up the



mountain, checked out of the hotel and took a taxi to the northern end of the Rwenzori Mountains. Our search for the Rwenzori Helmeted Chameleon (*K. carpenteri*) was about to begin. Colin has only ever found two – one male and one female – and that was more than 15 years earlier. Colin still had diarrhea but purchased some Flagyl and medicated himself.

We acquired the services of two porters and started climbing at 09:15 from 1650 masl. The porters charged us Sh12,000 (R48) each. It was quite heavy going, and we stopped at 1800 masl for a rest. Colin spotted a lizard on a tree stump and we ended up catching two of them. They appeared to be Jackson's Forest Lizard (*Adolfus jacksoni*). We carried on up the mountain and our porters abandoned us just short of a military base virtually on the top of the mountain. I got the idea that they were scared that the military guys may take their money. The military guys were friendly – in fact a little too friendly. They even wanted to carry our gear for us and invited us to take a short cut through their temporary camp. They were living like rats – in trenches dug into the ground and covered with branches and leaves! Their weapons, AK 47s, were shiny from excessive handling. Needless to say, they



Above - Colin with his tent on the Rwenzori Mountains

asked us for food and money. The commander of the unit informed us that he would appreciate some money since “technically, I am bankrupt!” We each ate a chocolate for some energy and then continued to the top – 2380 masl. The forest is magnificent – we could not wait to look for chameleons!

We set up camp on level land in a bit of a clearing next to a bamboo thicket. It was just after 13:00 and the sun was filtering through the trees, but it was quite chilly. We walked around in the afternoon but saw no sign of reptiles. We looked for the stream on the eastern slope to collect some water but couldn't find it. We got back to camp at about 16:00 and had a rest.

We ate some tomato and basil soup and then went looking for chameleons. It was hard going - we walked west along a

path for about an hour but saw nothing. Then, Colin found a Boulenger's Pygmy Chameleon (*Rhampholeon boulengeri*) female about 1.5 m off the ground, close to the pathway. We continued looking for quite a while but found nothing and decided to head east. Colin spotted a male Rwenzori Helmeted Chameleon (*K. carpenteri*) about 1.6 m off the ground on a bare stick out in the open. A bit further east, quite close to the military camp, we caught a second male about 4 m off the ground, also on a bare twig. We cut a piece of bamboo and got the chameleon to walk onto the bamboo. It was a larger male with a damaged tail. We saw another male, also in the open on a bare twig but about 10 m off the ground. We decided to call it a day – it was windy and cold, and we had



Above - Boulenger's Pygmy Chameleon (*Rhampholeon boulengeri*)

pretty much accomplished the mission. I never thought that the Musandama Forest would produce so quickly!

We slept very well and had some sweet tea for breakfast, an energy bar and packed up to head down the mountain. It was a long, hard walk down the mountain with a few rest stops. We ate some chocolate bars and managed to avoid the military guys. We also saw more Jackson's Forest Lizard (*A. jacksoni*) – they appeared to be quite common. At the bottom of the mountain, we managed to get some Agamas (*Agama sp.* and *Acanthocercus sp.*), as well as a DOR (dead on road) Green Snake (*Philothamnus sp.*). We then walked to the nearest local village where we had some welcomed cold drinks (Sh300 – R1.20) as well as some bananas (Sh300 – R1.20). After lunch we squeezed into a minibus taxi (Sh2000 each – R8) and headed back to Fort Portal.

We booked into the Rwenzori Travelers Inn again, and after we did some washing, we had a plate of chips and some coffee (Sh3,800–R15) on the verandah. Fort Portal is a busy town with a constant flow of vehicles and masses of people moving in all directions. Colin told me that the chameleons from the area have a habit of leaping off a branch, then coiling up and

disappearing amongst the leaf litter as they hit the ground. We experienced that when attempting to photograph some – very frustrating. You put a chameleon on a branch and it just leaps into the air. We photographed the Colubus Monkeys at the camp site but didn't have sufficient light to get good images. We then headed back to the hotel for steak and chips (Sh16,000 – R64).

After breakfast, we headed out for Nyakalengijo. We paid our fees for 4 days on the mountain and were now after the Rwenzori Plate-nosed Chameleon (*Kinyongia xenorhina*), another chameleon that I have never seen and would love to photograph. Our mountain access permits cost \$324 USD (R2150) each – rather expensive! We had an omelet for

Below left - Colin with some fair-sized Tilapia. **Right top** - Big-horned Cattle. **Right bottom** - Street scene in Uganda.



lunch and took a walk towards the mountain, scratching around. On the way, we saw some Speckle-lipped Skinks (*Trachylepis maculilabris*), Tree Agamas (*Acanthocercus* sp.), and a few Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleons (*T. ellioti*). We bumped into Alan Channing and his colleagues – they had just been up the mountain looking for frogs and had a lot of gear with them. I was wondering why they chose the dry season for frogging, but never asked. We gave them a lift to where they were living and then had a bit of a nap. I wasn't feeling well at all and spent a few hours in bed after Colin had medicated me with an assortment of drugs. We got to have a welcome hot shower, or was it a bath? It was a tub of hot water which we had to pour over our bodies. It was great!

Dinner at the community center consisted of goat stew and chips. I was still not feeling well, and Colin ate my stew while I had a Coke. We then drove down to the main road to get cellphone signal and look for chameleons. There were lots of Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleons (*T. ellioti*), but nothing else. We got to bed early – I was feeling awful. We were up early and ready for 4 days on the mountain, but I was not feeling well at all.

I chatted with Colin and we decided to postpone the trip up the mountain. I suggested that Colin go up with a guide while I remain behind to recover, but he decided to stay. I spent most of the morning in bed and consumed more of Colin's drugs. He was of the opinion that I had contracted some virus. It helps to travel with a medical doctor. Colin headed for town to change some money and rebook our tickets back home. We had decided to shorten the trip and head home. A man from the community center brought us some Rwenzori Plate-nosed Chameleons (*K. xenorhina*) to photograph – a juvenile and two adults. We were also looking for Johnston's Three-horned Chameleon (*Trioceros johnstoni*), but he told us that we had to go up the mountain to get them.

Colin made some oxtail soup and basmati rice with chicken viennas. I managed to get some food down, and we took a walk up the hill with our torches. We ran into Alan Channing and co. again where they were frogging in some wetlands, and saw some



Above - Colin surrounded by butterflies



Above - Female Johnston's Three-horned Chameleon (*Trioceros johnstoni*).



Above - Equator.



Above - Seine netters on Lake Victoria.

toads (*Sclerophrys sp.*) and Tree Frogs (*Leptopelis sp.*). Further up the hill we saw a few Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleons (*T. ellioti*), some quite high up (>5 m). Colin got a beautiful male Rwenzori Plate-nosed Chameleon, (*K. xenorhina*) and we saw another male quite high up. We also managed to find two Johnston's Three-horned Chameleons (*T. johnstoni*), both females. They were about 3 m off the ground. It's a real pity we didn't get any males – I would have loved to get some photographs.

I woke up the next morning feeling much better! We had some sweet tea and oats and were on the road again.

Accommodation cost us Sh60,000 (R240). We photographed a female Elliot's Groove-throated Chameleons (*T. ellioti*) at the type locality, Bugoye, and had lunch at the now-familiar Green Garden Restaurant at the Saad Hotel – beef and chicken curry (Sh9,000 – R36). It was a nice, hot sunny day. We stopped off at Kalinza Forest to find a camping spot, but the facilities were poor and the prices very high, so we headed off into Kalinza Forest, adjacent to a tea estate. While waiting for it to get dark so that we could look for chameleons, Colin made us some 2-minute noodles. We spent about 1½ hours looking

for chameleons, and Colin got one Boulenger's Pygmy Chameleon, (*R. boulengeri*) which we photographed.

We then headed for Mbarara and got there quite late. The Round Table had some function and it was very noisy with lots of drunken people around. They were knocking on our doors, stumbling down stairs and singing loudly until the early hours of the morning. I had a sleepless night with all the noise and was bugged by mosquitoes. We had breakfast and checked

out. Breakfast cost Sh5,000 (R20) and the accommodation Sh30,000 (R120). We refueled on the way to Kampala (Sh75,000 + \$20 (R430)) and nearly ran into some problems – it was Sunday and Colin had run out of local currency – we couldn't change Dollars to pay for the fuel. We managed to sort it out eventually.

Our flight back to Johannesburg was pleasant and the trip memorable. It was my first trip with Colin and I really enjoyed time with him in the field.

Below - Rwenzori Plate-nosed Chameleon (*Kinyongia xenorhina*)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johan Marais has undertaken numerous field trips throughout Africa in search of reptiles and amphibians. He has assisted on numerous research collection trips and has had two species named after him - *Pachydactylus maraisi* and *Zygaspis maraisi*. His photography and knowledge has resulted in several field-guides on reptiles and many scientific publications as well as magazine and newspaper articles.



Keeping of Indigenous Reptiles in Gauteng Province

Text by **Rynette Coetzee**

INTRODUCTION

Relevant legislation: The Gauteng Nature Conservation Ordinance 12 of 1983 The National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act 10 of 2004 (NEMBA) and The Threatened or Protected Species Regulations of 2007 (ToPS).

Reptiles are defined as “wild animals” in the Ordinance:

“**wild animal**” means any vertebrate, including a bird and a reptile but excluding a fish, belonging to a species which is not a recognised domestic species and the natural habitat of which is either temporarily or permanently in the Republic, the territory of South West Africa or a territory which was formerly part of the Republic, and includes the carcass, egg, flesh, whether fresh or cured, biltong, hide, skin, thong, tooth, tusk, bone, horn, shell, scale, claw, nail, hoof, paw, tail, ear, hair, feather or any other part of such vertebrate, excluding any part of such vertebrate which has been processed into a final product.

Q. Which indigenous reptiles may be kept on permit?

Snakes, Water Monitor, Rock Monitor, Leopard Tortoise. (No association membership is required when the person is only keeping a Leopard tortoise. Only single tortoises are allowed, or where space allows, single sex tortoises. No breeding is allowed)

Q. Which indigenous reptiles may not be kept even if they are captive bred?

Crocodiles, all species of chameleon, all species of tortoise other than a Leopard tortoise, all species of terrapin and turtle, all species of lizard other than the rock and water monitors. This applies even if you are a member of a Herpetological Association.

Q. Which indigenous reptiles may be bred by a permit holder?

Only snakes listed on the Ordinance. Registration and a standing permit as a captive breeder must be obtained for South African Rock Pythons, Namaqua Dwarf Adders and Gaboon Adders listed on ToPS.

Q. Which reptiles require membership of a Herpetological Association?

Snakes and monitors (Leopard tortoises for association members who apply for permit)

Q. May permit holders import reptiles from other provinces?

Yes for species indigenous to Gauteng and as long as they can provide proof of captive breeding, and have completed a risk assessment. The exporter must have valid permits in their home province and may not have sourced wild animals. The importing province will request this information on receipt of the application to import the snake or monitor. Applications for extra-limital species are referred to GDARD's Scientific Services for consideration

Q. Where can Herpetological Association members source snakes and monitors?

From Herpetological Association members with valid permits, who can prove captive breeding of the snake/monitor. Captive breeders must show proof of both male and female snakes/monitors and excludes offspring from illegally acquired gravid stock. Some registered zoos may also be able to supply captive bred animals

ENQUIRIES:

ConservationPermits@gauteng.gov.za

Rynette Coetzee is a biodiversity officer for Sustainable Utilisation of the Environment Branch of the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (GDARD).