

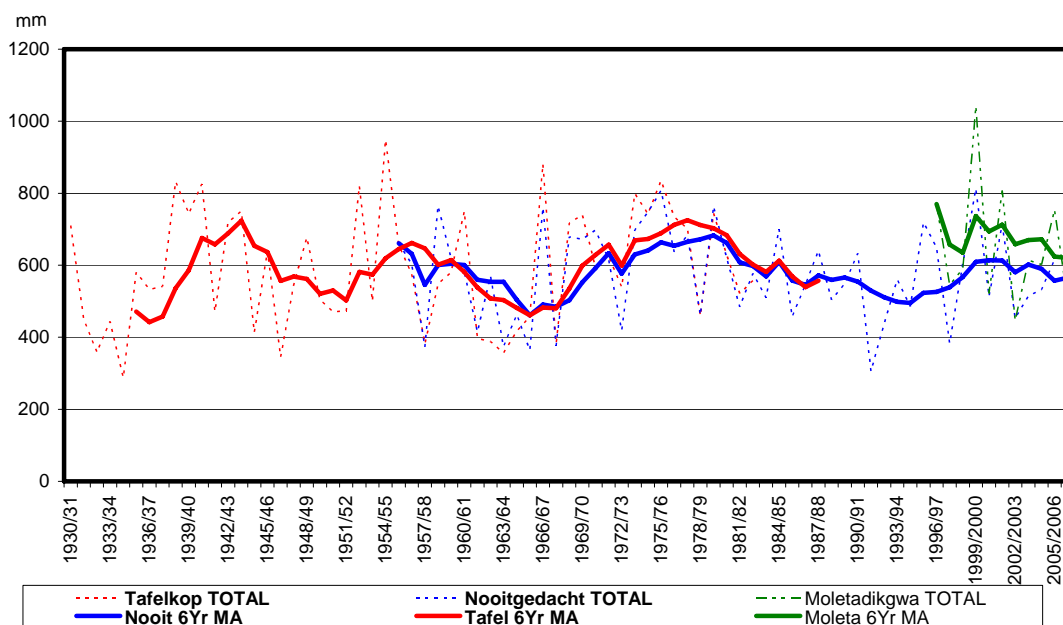
Moletadikgwa Wildlife Sanctuary

Newsletter - Autumn 2007

Early last year, I wrote "It's hard to believe now, in mid-February, with the dams overflowing, water bubbling out of every fracture, our small streams gurgling and tinkling,...". It's even harder to believe now, a year later, that the seasons can vary so much: this rainy season, we had a reasonable, but slow start to the rains, with a particularly good December. By the year end, we'd had 309mm (cf 204 last season), the veld was looking magnificent and we were all set for a bumper season. But it was not to be: since then, we've had another 190mm, taking our total to 499mm for the season so far, against 743mm this time last year. We're not alone in having to deal with the drought - the whole summer rainfall area in South Africa is experiencing similar conditions - but it comes as a shock nevertheless. Fortunately, our veld was in good condition prior to the rains, and we've been luckier than some, for example on the Springbok Flats, who've had a much worse season.

A drought, by the way, is officially defined as a season in which the rainfall is less than 85% of the long term average for the area (we're at about 83% at present). Inevitably, everyone is muttering about this being yet another consequence of global warming; copies of Al Gore's DVD are circulating through the community, fuelling both this argument and other dire prophecies for the country. The fact of the matter, however, is that there is a much simpler explanation, supported by accurate statistics collected on neighbouring farms continuously since 1930: we are currently in the middle of a 'dry' cycle, which commenced in about 2002 and the duration of which can be anything between 6 and 9 years. This accords well with research carried out for the country as a whole, which shows that at least for the last century, wet and dry cycles have alternated with a periodicity of this order. In our area, the previous dry cycle was marked by rainfall of only 309mm 1991/92, and 397mm in 1997/98, so in fact we ought to be quite relieved about our total this season. The good news is that we can look forward to the next wet cycle commencing within the next couple of years - perhaps just in time to coincide with the 2010 World Cup!

Tafelkop/Nooitgedacht/Moletadikgwa Long Term Rainfall Trends



Remarkably, the veld remains in excellent condition, thanks to the good rain that fell during the period of new growth; but we'll have to take steps within the next month or so to reduce our stock levels, in order to ensure that there is no long term damage to our grazing and browsing capacity. This need has been aggravated by what has been a record year for new arrivals: since January, the farm has started to resemble a nursery school at the beginning of a new year, with infants everywhere, shepherded by anxious parents and carers: over 20 impala lambs, many kudu calves, four wildebeest and four hartebeest calves, three zebra foals, two waterbuck calves, innumerable warthoglets - and, to our great delight, the first giraffe calf, fifteen anxious months after we first noticed the undue attention being paid to the female giraffe by her mate.

The calf, a male, was born on 19 January, and because this was the week in which we enjoyed several excellent sightings of the comet McNaught, that is his name! We've since spent many entrancing hours observing the family and, I'm pleased to report, have awarded the father high marks for parental care. Contrary to what we've read about male giraffes - their tendency to remain aloof from their young and to go off on their own - this father is a doting one: we often find him nudging young McNaught along with his knees, bending down to give him a lick and ensuring that he places himself between

his son and any potential risk. All this while mother browses contentedly on some branches in the middle distance. Clearly, what we have here is an example of 'Generation X' parenting - in the heart of the conservative Waterberg, *noga!*



McNaught 'n his dad out on a browse

We're disappointed that it's been several months since we last saw leopard spoor on the farm, although brown hyena still do the rounds now and again. Currently, a research programme into leopard territorial behaviour is being conducted in our area by Lourens Swanepoel, a masters student attached to the Centre for Wildlife Management at the University of Pretoria. Lourens has found that the territorial range of a male leopard on the Waterberg plateau can be as much as 20 000km², more than double that of the Kruger Park, due to a combination of hunting, infrastructure and the diversity of land use. He traps leopards, using bait, and attaches GPS-equipped collars before releasing them again. These collars transmit regular signals that can be received and plotted to show the movements of individual animals. Sometimes, unfortunately, the signals suddenly stop and do not re-commence - and in certain instances, from the last known location of the animal, it can be deduced that the creature was shot and the collar destroyed. There are very few permits issued for hunting leopard in this area, but stories of trophy animals are legion...

In addition to trapping leopards, Lourens uses baited sites to photograph them, by setting up a digital camera fitted with an infra-red trigger. Of course this results in many 'spurious' images - of bush pigs, porcupines, hyenas etc - but recently, Lourens has imaged two different male leopards, one on the farm immediately to the south of us and the other on Lindani, to the north. He thinks there is a good chance of our finding spoor on our farm once again within the next few weeks.

Since 1953, when the first edition appeared, *Veld Types of South Africa*, by John Acocks has been the primary source of knowledge for students of South African vegetation (including ecologists, farmers, park managers environmentalists, and interested amateurs like us). But despite its excellence, "Acocks" gradually became outdated, as more botanical studies were undertaken, newer models applied and the complex interplay of the factors that determine an ecosystem became better understood. A new work was needed - and at last, it has arrived.

"The Vegetation of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland", edited by Ladislav Mucina and Michael Rutherford, was published this month by SANBI, the SA National Biodiversity Institute. The editors have delivered a truly outstanding work, and a worthy successor to "Acocks". Their 800 page tome, which integrates contributions from about a hundred individual researchers, divides the region into 9 principal biomes (a biome being a major ecological community that extends over a large geographic area characterized by a dominant type of vegetation); and within these, 435 different vegetation types, compared with the 70 identified by Acocks.

Their book is superbly illustrated and is accompanied by a map (on a scale of 1:1 million) that is nothing less than a technical work of art. This surely has to be the most impressive publication yet issued by a government department in South Africa. The book can be obtained from SANBI bookshops at the National Botanical Gardens in Pretoria and at Kirstenbosch; price R380 incl VAT.

Sincerely,

Lyn & Richard Wadley
April 2007