



SHAPES AT SUNSET: Red hartebeest on top of Bouerskop at Samara Game Reserve near Graaff-Reinet

PHOTOGRAPHS: GUY ROGERS

# Mythical experience in the Karoo

Gentle character of myth and legend moved busily on the last night of their visit, writes **Guy Rogers**

**L**IKE Roald Dahl's BFG, the extraordinary aardvark has amazing hearing, capable of picking up even the "chittering and scuddling" of the ants beneath the soil.

The ears of Given Mbetse, 23, are not quite so other-worldly but for a paltry human still pretty cutting-edge. Sometimes on patrol in the dead of night in the Karoo bush, Bouerskop silhouetted against a crescendo of stars, he stops his bicycle and flicks off his spotlight and just listens.

And then he hears it: the tell-tale sound of the aardvark's nails clicking along the hard surface of the gravel road. Mbetse is employed at Samara Game Reserve near Graaff-Reinet as a dedicated aardvark tracker – perhaps the only one of his kind in the world.

In a lifetime of visiting wild places I had never seen this mysterious creature so when I heard they were being regularly spotted at Samara, I knew we had to get there.

The aardvarks had obviously heard we were coming because on our way in, after we had turned onto the gravel, sure enough – we got stuck in an aardvark hole.

Swerving to avoid one on the right, I drifted into one on the left and my boys had to get out and lift at the back while I revved us free.

Aardvarks are nocturnal because they're not fond of the heat of the day but with the cooler temperatures through the winter at Samara they were being spotted even after sunrise.

We were well into spring but set off on our first game drive the afternoon we got there with ranger



TRAIL BLAZERS: Ranger Jan Dunn and aardvark tracker Given Mbetse take care of the wildlife at the reserve

Jan Dunn, hoping for the best.

On top of Bouershoek in the warm evening air, we spotted a grey-winged francolin, not far from the vehicle but beautifully camouflaged in the grass in its mosaic cloak of grey-brown feathers.

Winding slowly across the plateau, past the little white-trunked shepherd trees (so named for the good shade they have offered

to sheep herders through the centuries and their nutritious leaves which can be made into porridge). Dunn pointed out the disheveled nests of the white-browed sparrow weaver (which didn't graduate from weaver school).

A herd of Cape mountain zebra watched us then galloped away kicking up puffs of dust, before

stopping to stare again.

On the brow of a rise a phalanx of scimitar-horned gemsbok assembled against the setting sun.

We descended again through Wolwekloof, the sky on fire ahead and behind a "ghost moon" rising through a gauze of cloud.

The next morning was our first real chance of seeing an aardvark

and I was up well before dawn to chivvy the boys and get us into Dunn's vehicle.

Quarter of an hour into the drive, we drew up to a water hole and a flock of blue cranes, which had obviously been drinking and foraging for frogs, exploded from behind the embankment and flew past us, their wings rimmed by the rising sun, making their strange rattling-purring call.

Still no aardvark so, back at Karoo Lodge, I found a corner on the magnificent veranda and delved into Smithers's Mammals of the Southern African Region from which I learned that aardvark are widely distributed across Sub-Saharan Africa but little is known about them.

Covering up to 30km a night, they use their powerful legs and claws to dig up nests of ants and termites and their long sticky tongues to slurp up the insects while their thick skin allows them to withstand the retaliation of the soldier ants.

Farmers are typically not fond of them because of the damage their burrows can cause to vehicles, machinery and dam walls.

From Smithers I turned to Taffy and David Shearing's account of the Boer War battle of Paardefontein on the top of Bouershoek, that Jan had told us about.

Pursued by British Lt-Col Harry Scobell, Boer leader Johannes Lotter led 26 exhausted men onto Bouershoek, where they holed up in outhouses on the farm Paarde-

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fontein. Scobell and his troops attacked them there on September 5 1901, killing 13 Boers, who were subsequently buried nearby in the hamlet of Petersburg (which is today the private reserve Asante Sana).

All but one were captured and Lotter and his leaders were executed and buried in Middelburg.

Today, among the ruins of Paardefontein, you can still see corrugated iron sheeting riddled with bullet holes.

The one man who escaped was Daantjie Jonker, an "agterryer" or black servant to the commando who, as the Shearings write, "concealed himself in an aardvark hole".

We weren't equipped to accompany Mbetse at night but on our last day we walked with him through the morning dew and he showed us the aardvark's spoor, round droppings which, broken open, reveals bits of ant, and flies gathering at a fresh burrow.

A soft-spoken man with an easy-going demeanour, Mbetse grew up in Justicia, a Shangaan village in Mpumalanga. Having graduated from the Tracker Academy, with training at Londolosi and Samara, he started working at Samara six months ago.

Aardvarks get most of their moisture from the ants and other insects they eat but Mbetse says he has seen them drinking from puddles.

He has also witnessed another little-known phenomenon where they lie "sun basking" outside their holes in the early morning.

It's a very quiet animal, its only vocalisation a *phfffft* sound if he gets too close. It takes "two minutes" for it to dig one of its cavernous burrows.

On our last night, we went for a game drive after dinner with Dunn again and after we had given up all hope – suddenly, there it was: about 20m away, heavy-bodied with donkey ears, hunched back and a pig-like questing nose.

A gentle character of myth and legend, it moved busily about in the wash of Dunn's spotlight, barely seeming to notice us.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep," it seemed to be muttering to itself, echoing Robert Frost's poem. "But I have juicy ants to eat/ and miles to go before I sleep."



MONKEY EDEN: A vervet forages in the thicket around the Melk River at Samara

## Animals roam on road to game reserve

TO GET to Samara take the R75 from the Bay past Uitenhage towards Graaff-Reinet.

There are always monkeys along this road but for the first time we saw warthogs, at least half a dozen of them, rooting around outside the fences, just off the road reserve.

They're great characters but apparently their numbers are exploding and they're becoming a bit of a concern in terms of their affect on other species and damage to farmers' fences.

Not far past Jansenville on the left, is Thabela Farm Stall (076-168-4125) or (072-619-5474) which sells the best kudu pies – and other excellent padkos – and has a friendly Airedale puppy called Bella. About 20km before Graaff-Reinet turn right on the R63 to Pearston and after



7km turn left onto a dirt road to Petersburg. Samara's Karoo Lodge is 23km along this road in a beautiful arc of the Sneeuberg.

We had a complicated itinerary, involving besides our visit to Samara, a mountain bike race in Steytlerville and a friend's birthday at Asante Sana (049 891-0576), so we ended up popping into Thabela four times in five days – surely a record.

In Steytlerville we stayed at the historic Noorspoort Guest Farm (060 646-8536), which is owned by George Craven, son of Springbok great Danie Craven, and dined at the super-friendly and efficient Royal Hotel (049 835-0385).

We needed a chemist and couldn't find one but the café diagonally opposite the hotel stocked just about everything, and I enjoyed a chat with the Bangladeshi owner about the England v Bangladesh test and the rising tide of Bangladeshi cricket.



QUIET ANIMAL: A aardvark at Samara taken by Max Waugh

PARTNERSHIP DEAL: This white rhino and calf were being trailed by a gang of glossy starlings who were enjoying the insect treats thrown up as the rhino munched their way across the veld and, below right, a shepherd tree



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