GOODBYE TO PHD STUDENT VANESSA WANDJA

After having spent the past 12 months with us, our roan antelope researcher, Vanessa Wandja, has completed her fieldwork and has moved to Pretoria to start the next phase of her research at the university’s endocrine laboratory. Vanessa spent seven days a week with our roan in the breeding camps to record reproductive behaviour and collect faecal samples for hormone analyses. We were amazed to see how the roan groups that Vanessa was monitoring completely accepted her presence in the herds and we enjoyed seeing Vanessa’s enthusiasm and growing knowledge about roan. We wish her all the best for the remainder of her studies and look forward to receiving her results and conclusions, which will be an invaluable tool in the conservation of this species.

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES & RAINFALL

JULY

Rainfall = 0 mm
Min temp = 4 °C
Max temp = 16.7 °C
Our Research & Veterinary Manager, Dr Annemieke Müller, has officially taken up her role as our resident wildlife veterinarian, performing the wildlife immobilisations and treatments on Lapalala. Annemieke is originally from the Netherlands, but she fell in love with Africa when she spent a large part of her childhood in Nigeria. She completed her veterinary degree at Utrecht University and arrived at Lapalala in 2011 as a PhD student. As part of her studies, she monitored our rhinos intensely for more than two years, investigating female reproductive activity and its endocrine correlates in the white rhino. It was also during this period that she met her future partner – our biodiversity manager, Hermann Müller. Aside from her passion for research and conservation, Annemieke’s goal has always been to work as a wildlife veterinarian. This dream began to take shape while she attended specialised courses and assisted Hermann’s team with their veterinary activities on the reserve. The final step required her to pass the Veterinary Board Examination and register as a veterinarian in South Africa. We congratulate her on this significant achievement and are confident that Lapalala now has a strong veterinary team on standby whenever we need one.

**BLOB OF A FROG**

The mottled shovel-nosed frog (*Hemisus marmoratus*) is one of the cutest species of amphibians out there. This peculiar-looking frog is a capable digger and uses its sharp snout as a wedge to dig underground where it hides and hibernates. If the soil is soft, they completely disappear in a matter of seconds. As a second line of defence, this frog takes a large gulp of air which causes its body to inflate like a blob, making it difficult for predators to swallow. Cobus discovered this individual during road maintenance work, adding another species to our amphibian list.
A WARM WELCOME TO THE TINTSWALO TEAM

As our reserve enters an exciting new phase of development, we are eagerly awaiting the launch of our first commercial lodge, Tintswalo at Lapalala. This luxury tented camp forms part of the Tintswalo Lodges Classic Collection and is set to open in the next few months. The team that will manage the lodge arrived this month and is working hard to transform the lodge – which was previously known as Founders Camp – into a unique experience for guests, offering the highest standard of luxury in the middle of pristine wilderness.

NURSE PLANTS STIMULATE NATIVE PLANT GROWTH

Following 18 months of research at Lapalala, a new paper by Dr Sheunesu Ruwanza (University of Venda) has been published in the African Journal of Ecology. Dr Ruwanza’s research paper, entitled “Nurse plants have the potential to accelerate vegetation recovery in Lapalala Wilderness old fields, South Africa” focused on the ecological restoration of old agricultural fields. The research describes how the presence of native plants under the nurse plants canopy points to a positive vegetation recovery trajectory. Please contact Lapalala directly if you would like to receive a copy of the full article.
The fourth of July marked the beginning of this year’s joint Lapalala Wilderness and Panthera annual leopard survey. This means that, for the next eight weeks, a total of 80 cameras throughout the reserve will be capturing images of passing animals. During our first check in the Wilderness area we noticed that an entire camera was missing. It is no mean feat to remove a camera that is securely fastened to a pole with cable ties, so we hoped that the identity of our culprit would be revealed by the other camera on this road. And there we found our camera thief, caught in the act. Would you believe that, two weeks later, another camera was stolen on this same road? Our rangers found a part of one of the cameras about a kilometre away from the road. One wonders what this brown hyena’s plan is…

NEW ACCESS ROAD TO TINTSWALO

Lapalala is undergoing many changes and it is important for our road management team to continuously adapt strategies to improve the connectivity between lodge sites, entrance gates and game viewing areas. A good example is the new South West access road where a Sudpave plastic grid was employed. This is designed to stabilise soils exposed to water runoff. The plates have an integral spike that helps to prevent the grid from movement. Before the grid can be installed, the area is levelled and compacted and overlaid with a layer of geotextile covered with compacted sand. The plastic grid is then placed over this and filled with gravel. Finally, the gravel is compacted into the structure and carefully stabilised. By using this technique, the team did a great job in creating a safe, stable and sustainable road to drive on.