



# Call on citizen scientists to map weaver nests

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When visiting the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, pay careful attention to every element of the landscape - there are always hidden surprises in the living desert of the Green Kalahari.

Close to the Rooiputs Waterhole, along the Nossob River, a majestic and slow-growing camel-thorn tree rises from the poor sandy soil. It carries a spectacular sociable weaver nest; an incredible piece of work for such small birds. These gigantic nests are a hotspot for interspecies interactions as they provide both food and shelter. On February 24, 2016 two bright yellow ring-like objects were hanging from the nest.

The colour was so striking and the rings so well defined that, at first, it was hard to believe it was a snake. The Cape cobra was flowing elegantly from one chamber to another, briefly revealing the tip of its tail or that of its head. The snake always appeared calm and staid; it worked its way methodically through the nest, making sure that not one chamber would be missed. A few weavers would try their best at intimidation, flying and mobbing

the cobra whenever its head was out aiming at its next target. The bravest parents guarded the entrance to their chamber, but had to fly away as the confident snake made its move towards them.

It can be hard to watch these powerless birds, witnessing their most feared predator inflicting a mass murder, especially knowing how costly it is for these birds to invest so much time and energy in nest building and breeding. However, it is also saddening to realise that the meticulous cobra only found empty chambers, possibly because many weaver colonies had skipped breeding this last season, due to the drought. This dramatic scene from nature emphasises that day-to-day survival is the overwhelming priority of the desert inhabitants.

Although it is well known that snakes (especially cobras and boomslangs) prey on chicks in weaver nests, it is rarely reported. Dr Dieter Oschadleus, the head of the South African Bird Ringing Unit, is running the Photos of Weaver Nests (PHOWN) project, which aims to monitor the breeding distribution of all weavers and to study variation in colony sizes. Any records of predation (or potential

predation) on them are highly informative too.

PHOWN is a citizen-science project, which means that anyone can contribute to the open-access database by sending photos of the weaver colonies, with details of date, species, coordinates, and nest counts. There are more than 19 000 photo records in the PHOWN database, which gives insight into the associations with many other bird species, mice, frogs, wasps and of course, snakes. This has already proved enormously valuable.

All the instructions for participating in PHOWN appear on the Weaver Watch website ([www.weavers.adu.org.za/phown.php](http://www.weavers.adu.org.za/phown.php)), entirely developed by Oschadleus himself. It is also a great opportunity to get to know weavers - an amazing, diverse bird family, ranging from granivores to insectivores, and colonial breeders to solitary nesters.

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is a great place to start collecting data for PHOWN, and maybe, while contributing to the understanding and conservation of weavers, you too will come across a Cape cobra, a pygmy falcon or one of the many weaver nest users.

## More space in wilderness camps

The wilderness camps in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (KTP) are the place to visit for those seeking the untamed wild. Recently Kieliekrankie and Urikaruus both gained an additional unit to meet the growing demand for accommodation.

Kieliekrankie is the closest wilderness camp to the entrance, located 46km from Twee Rivieren. Ben van Eeden, KTP tourism manager says the new unit is identical to the four existing ones. They are furnished with two single beds, a bathroom with a shower and a fully equipped kitchen with gas fridge/freezer, solar lights, gas geyser and braai facility. Once the final outstanding work has been done, it will be added to the booking system.

The new unit at Urikaruus is somewhat different from the others. The kitchen is part of the open-plan unit and the bedroom is furnished with a double bed. The other four units have single beds. This camp is approximately two hours from Twee Rivieren on the road to

Mata-Mata and overlooks the Auob River.

General maintenance is also on the cards for Urikaruus, Grootkolk and Gharagab this year. These wilderness camps will be closed for the duration of the maintenance period. It forms part of a much larger process scheduled over the next three years. While maintenance work can disturb visitors in the main camps, everything will be done to limit the impact, says Van Eeden.

Wilderness camps are unique for more reasons than the absence of fences. "They are isolated with a very small impact from other visitors. Each has its own waterhole so it offers unique game-viewing opportunities," explains Van Eeden. Other camps where you can experience true wilderness are Bitterpan, Grootkolk and Gharagab with four units each, and the larger Kalahari Tented Camp with 15 units. Children younger than 12 years are not allowed.

Visit [www.sanparks.org](http://www.sanparks.org) to make your booking.



### FILLING STATIONS RECEIVE FACELIFTS

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is in the process of upgrading all its filling stations - a project which started at Twee Rivieren. Visitors should therefore note that the availability of fuel at the camp during the maintenance will be limited. Only diesel will be sold from a temporary supply tank in the camp reception area. It is not possible to store and sell unleaded petrol from a similar tank system. Visitors are requested to fill up their vehicles at Askham, situated about 74km from the park

on the R360. The project will extend over a period of three months with construction work taking place Mondays to Saturdays from 08:00 to 16:30. Diesel and unleaded fuel will be available at both Mata-Mata and Nossob camps while work at Twee Rivieren is in progress. The park apologises for the inconvenience while making the improvements to provide quality facilities to all guests. **Enquiries: +27-54-561-2000 or email [Kgalagadi@sanparks.org](mailto:Kgalagadi@sanparks.org).**



## Book give-away for avid Kgalagadi visitors

The cooler winter months are a great time to look out for honey badgers in the Kgalagadi. They are often about in the daylight during this time.

Sometimes they are solitary, at other times a pair consisting of a mother and her cub trotting along, seemingly oblivious to everything going on around them.

They are frequently accompanied by several chanting goshawks. Two or more goshawks, especially perched low a bush, are often a sign

that there are honey badgers around. Sometimes a jackal or two will also join the feeding party to see what can be had.

The honey badgers take little notice of these fellow foragers.

If you are interested in information such as this about the Kalahari, get your hands on *A Natural History Guide to the Arid Kalahari, Including the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park*, by Gus and Margie Mills.

They spent many years in this

national park as researchers, and are now sharing their knowledge about a vast array of subjects in this book.

*A Natural History Guide to the Arid Kalahari, Including the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park* can be ordered for R175 (plus postage) from [margiemills@gmail.com](mailto:margiemills@gmail.com). SANParks Times has one copy to give away to a reader.

Send us your details to [sanparkstimes@caxton.co.za](mailto:sanparkstimes@caxton.co.za) - the first one to reach us will get the book.