

NOCTURNAL ANIMALS OF THE FYNBOS

“from ghoulies and ghosties and long-leggety beasties
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us!”

--Anon

I live by the seaside, in part because I love the seascape. I often forget that I see only the surface of the ocean, and that the depths hide a myriad wonders, which require no little effort to experience.

In exactly the same way, being diurnal creatures ourselves, we are largely unaware of the rich diversity of animal life that inhabits the night. Fortunately, these creatures are less difficult to see, and some little effort will provide great rewards.

The Fynbos night is populated with many animals and I will try to impart my wonderment of this menagerie in this article.

SOME MAMMALS

Almost every stream flowing into the sea around our coast has an otter family.

The **Cape Clawless Otter** (*Aonyx capensis*) is one of only two species of otter occurring in South Africa. It is distributed from Saldanha around the coast right up into Maputo, as well as along the Orange and Kunene rivers.

Surprisingly large, walking with an arched back on land, they are marvellously supple and fluid in water.

Their spoor is distinctive, the size of a medium - sized dog but without any claw - marks.

They are active at dark twilight (**crepuscular**) and patient stillness near a stream will often be rewarded by a view of a family group gambolling down the beach and then starting the serious business of earning a living.

These otters have the ability to forage in water with poor visibility by touch alone. They eat crabs, fish, mussels, which are smashed on rocks, and frogs, birds and insects. "Latrine " areas show droppings made up of crushed crustacean carapaces (**in contrast with those of the Water Mongoose, which passes even crustacean legs undamaged**).

The Holt is always well hidden in a bank or climax dune thicket. Two to three cubs are born per litter, the family staying together for some time, and appealingly showing much affection (attention) towards each other.



A very rare animal in our region is **the Striped Polecat**. Another of the family **Mustelidae**, it is widespread in South Africa. It is often noted as a road kill. (*Ictonyx striatus*). It squirts a foul liquid from its anal glands as a defence mechanism. Its conspicuous four white and three black stripes, and its offensive habit remind one strongly of the American skunks.

Water Mongooses, (*Atilax paludinosus*), are very difficult to see.

Their home range tends to be linear along streams' in thick undergrowth.

They can be glimpsed rarely, if food is left out at night, but are likely to raid at an unpredictable time.

I have only seen this species once, when a pair, fighting outside my bedroom window, woke me with their loud chattering, one moonlit night.

They are distributed through much the same areas as the otters, and they compete with the otters for much the same food types. One to three young are born in the last six months of the year.



The most easily accessible nocturnal member of the **Viverridae**, and widely distributed, is the **Large - spotted Genet**, (*Geneta tigrina*) (pictured) and the **Small - spotted Genet** *Geneta geneta* they are very beautiful, slender and graceful.

The latter is the one we see here in Betty's Bay.

They can be easily trained to visit a lighted stoep for scraps and bones. We are very privileged to live in one of the few regions of the world where it is possible to view a wild animal from the comfort of our living - rooms.

Genets will largely ignore one in their eagerness to assuage their hunger, and will learn to come when

called and even to take food out of the hand.

Caution; some people (**me!**) have had fingers badly bitten, presumably on the basis that a finger is just another meaty bone to a hungry Genet! The large ringed tail, slim, beautifully proportioned body, and sensitive, intelligent face, with marked white patches under the eyes and on the chin, make this animal one of the most charming.

They range widely and may cover several kilometres a night in their foraging expeditions.

Usually solitary, genets are excellent climbers.

They eat insects, rodents, reptiles, birds, and other small mammals.

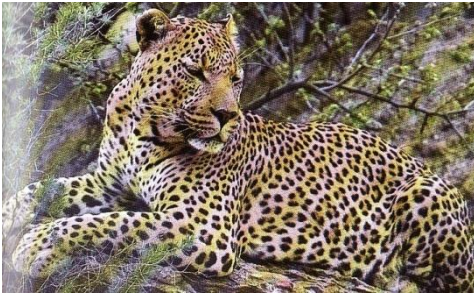
The young are born in summer, between 2 - 5 in a litter, eyes being closed at birth.

Unfortunately, they seem particularly vulnerable to being killed on our roads.

Recent research shows that many animals at risk on our roads can get out of the way if speeds are kept below 60 kph.

A robust cat, the **Caracal**, (*Felis caraca*), or Rooikat (not a lynx!), distinctive due to its pointed ears, is widespread but very shy, although it can be seen in the early morning. Females have been seen accompanied by kittens. They stalk their prey (mainly small to medium sized mammals), as closely as possible and then pounce!





The famous Betty's Bay **Leopard** (*Panthera pardus*), is well known and reports of isolated individuals surface from time to time.

Hopefully their numbers will recover with the protection the Kogelberg Biosphere Reserve will provide. The animal pictured here is the larger variety.

Ours are noticeably smaller and more slender.

One of the few truly Fynbos endemics, which is also a nocturnal mammal, is the **Cape Grysbok**, (*Raphicerus melanotis*).

It is small, brown with white specks in its coat. It has a short tail and largish ears.

Still frequently seen in our region, even within the built-up areas, yet it is under threat as more houses destroy the Fynbos and as kills on the main road decimate the population.

We have had the privilege of seeing an individual stroll through our garden, literally past us, while we were quietly enjoying the dusk of a summer evening.



Two **Bat species** occur here, one widespread, the other confined to the Western Cape. The former, the Cape Serotine Bat, (*Eptesicus capensis*) is indistinguishable in the field from the latter, Melck's Serotine bat, (*Eptesicus melckorum*). Little is known of their behaviour locally. There is a cave in the Rooi Els valley that is reputed to be the home of all the bats in this area.



The last mammal to be mentioned is **the Red Rock Rabbit**, (*Pronolagus rupestris*) (not to be confused with the Rock Dassie), nocturnal and seldom seen, because it prefers a mountain habitat. Its latrine is often noticed in the mountains. The lozenge-shaped brownish pellets are distinctive.

RODENTS

(*Mus minutoides*), a **Pygmy Mouse** is only 14 cm long, including the tail. They are common around here and can become pests if houses are invaded, although their size and endearing, lively ways generally do not evoke the murderous response usual to the house mouse.

House Mouse and House-Rat are introduced species and easily seen if you have a quiet supper on the stoep of a summer evening. (Mentioned only for completeness).



The **Striped Mouse** is however a common, and likeable denizen of the undergrowth, mainly diurnal, but mostly seen at twilight.



The **Cape Dune Molerat**, (*Bathyergus suillus*), is the largest of our Molerats, with cinnamon upper parts. They come to the surface at night, particularly during rains.

The scourge of the region's gardens (lock up your Arums) is the **Porcupine**, (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*), widely distributed and our largest rodent.

They can grow to a metre long and weigh up to 24 kg. They are strictly nocturnal, yet frequently seen, as they can be noisy feeders.

Many an irate gardener has pitched his shoe into his carefully tended private wetland, to inhibit the destruction of his bulbous plants. The porcupine is another common victim of speeding vehicles.



BIRDS



We have probably all seen a **Spotted Eagle Owl**, (*Bubo africanus*), common and ubiquitous.

It is one of our larger owls, often found hunting from a perch or eerily hooting its two-syllable call, descending in pitch.

The female splits the first note just noticeably into two, and this helps to distinguish them when they sing their duet.

They are also often killed by cars, and it makes sense to remove any road kills (of any sort) from the road surface, in order to lessen the chances that potential scavenging owls, (*or any other carnivore*), should also be hit, as it is a myth that carrion is not eaten by these creatures.

Less commonly seen but often heard, (less frequently of late), is the **Fiery necked Nightjar**, (*Caprimulgus pectoralis*), of the mournful call: "Good Lord deliver us", hence the name of **Litanybird**. It is crepuscular and used to be the cockcrow of Betty's Bay.



Similarly, the call of the **Water Dikkop**, (*Burhinus vermiculatus*), characterises the night sounds of the Kleinmond Lagoon.

INSECTS



Mister Peabody or the **Bladder Grasshopper** makes a loud screech, as if someone is being assassinated.

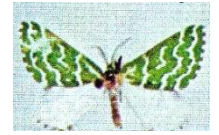
This is the amazing mating call of the interesting family, **Pneumoridae**, they are endemic to Southern Africa. They are green and look as if their abdomens have been pumped up with air.

This structure acts as a sounding board to resonate the call, which is produced by rubbing combs on the hind legs against projections on the abdomen.

The volume of sound this small creature can produce is phenomenal. They are often found when they fly into lighted rooms at night.

I think the call is like a woman's cry while having her throat slit!

The Kogelberg Biosphere is blessed with the most wonderful and beautiful **Moths**, some as large as saucers, others minute, many brown, some grey, and there is even a stunning **emerald green** species: (*Argyrographa moderata* – pictured life size).



Many have the most beautiful precise patterns. All are very largely ignored. Next time a moth flies into your living room, take the trouble to fetch a magnifier and give yourself a treat!



Glowworms and fireflies are neither. They are **beetles!** (Family Lampyridae.) Members of the genus Lampyrus they have larva-like females (Glowworms) and it is the male, which is winged and shows his flickering light, although how he attracts a wingless mate by this means, is unclear. The light organ consists of spherical cell masses filled with **luciferin**, which is oxidised under the action of the enzyme

luciferinase, to produce the **cold light**.

The reaction is reversible so that the oxidised luciferin can be reduced to undergo the cycle over and over again.

Fireflies are rarely seen here, but the sedentary females can be found on most still dark nights, in undisturbed Fynbos.

Occasionally, on calm November evenings, fireflies make a most splendid display in

Disa Kloof:

Thousands and thousands of fireflies dance to a ballet of splendour across the slopes of the kloof.

AMPHIBIANS

Frogs pipe us to sleep most nights and are a subject on their own.

The noisy **Raucous toad** (*Bufo rangeri*) is very common.

The **clicking frog** (*Strongylpus greii*) has a distinctive call – often heard before or after rain.

The last common nocturnal animal to be mentioned is the lowly **earthworm**, not spectacular, but essential to the health of the soil.

I do not mention it out of perversity, but again in wonder!

Next time you go outside on a dark moonless night, give your eyes a chance to become fully dark-adapted.

On your lawn, you will see faintly **green glowing** small patches,

These are not Glowworms, but the bioluminescent mucus exuded by the earthworm!

This series was intended to entertain, not to be an exhaustive monologue. I hope your appreciation of this special environment was enhanced.

Let us preserve the environment and all the life in it.

Peter Joubert
2010