

Taking Down Malaria’s Bodyguards: Scientists Target Parasite’s Secret Defence System



Anopheles mosquito. Image Canva

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Malaria remains one of the world’s most devastating infectious diseases, claiming more than half a million lives each year. In Africa, the illness is mostly caused by a parasite carried by mosquitoes - *Plasmodium falciparum*.

When the parasite invades the human body, it faces a hostile environment: soaring fevers, attacks from the body’s immune system, and the stress of antima-

larial medicines. Yet it can survive, thanks to an internal defence system made up of “helper” molecules known as heat shock proteins.

Among these, a powerful group called small heat shock proteins act as the parasite’s last line of defence. These molecules behave like tiny bodyguards, protecting other proteins inside the parasite from damage when conditions become extreme. They are the parasite’s emergency rescue team when energy reserves are dangerously low, such as during high fever or exposure to drugs.

In my biochemistry laboratory, we’re

looking for ways to disrupt these bodyguards.

Master’s student Francisca Magum Timothy and I are using advanced protein-chemistry tools to examine three small heat shock proteins found in the parasite. These share a common core structure but behave differently.

We’ve found that they can be chemically disrupted. This marks an exciting direction for malaria research. Instead of directly killing the parasite, the approach focuses on disarming its defences, allowing other treatments or the body’s immune system to finish the job.

The next steps involve finding small, drug-like molecules that can specifically target and disable these parasite proteins without harming human cells. This will require advanced computer modelling, laboratory testing and eventually, studies in animal models to make sure the approach is both effective and safe. If successful, this could lead to a new class of antimalarial drugs that work in a completely different way from current treatments. This is an especially important goal as resistance to existing medicines continues to grow.

Cont. on page 3



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Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

Following the DA-requested meeting on the municipal moratorium preventing new water connections to houses on certain estates, I wish to share my perspective. The moratorium applies only to estates drawing water from the Drakensig (Air Force Base) system. The issue is not just water availability from the Blyde River but the fact that the Drakensig purification plant has reached its capacity and risks collapse if demand grows further.

Although set for 12 months, discussions indicated the suspension could easily extend to two or three years, given jurisdictional confusion among Water Affairs, Maruleng Municipality, and Mopani District. No party has yet addressed fundamental engineering needs such as new pipelines, pumps, or a treatment-plant site.

This follows a decade of failed or incomplete projects: a 3 km pipeline near Zandfontein Estate that led nowhere, another abandoned pipe-laying contract in town, and rusting, unused storage tanks - all products of “tenderpreneurship” and waste. Millions of rand have vanished with nothing to show.

To move forward, government must clarify responsibility, appoint an independent consultant - not a cadre - to design and cost a proper system, and then tender only to qualified, experienced contractors. Given bureaucratic inertia, completion within four

years would be optimistic.

Meanwhile, limited progress can be achieved through practical measures: repairing existing infrastructure, fixing leaks, reducing waste, and imposing fair water-use caps for households, lodges, and businesses drawing from Drakensig. These steps could sustain ongoing building activity and preserve local jobs.

Attention must also turn to the proposed low-cost housing development, which will demand vast new water, sewage, electricity, and transport capacity. Instead of further straining Hoedspruit’s resources, an alternative could be revitalising the disused Tzaneen-Nelspruit railway line. Modernised stations at Acornhoek and Hoedspruit - with shops, taxi ranks, and amenities - could later link to Bushbuckridge, Hazyview, and Nelspruit. Suitable locomotives and refurbished carriages already exist.

Reliable rail commuting would sharply cut transport costs, ease R40 congestion, and reduce pressure to relocate to Hoedspruit. A public-private partnership could make it viable, particularly if local taxi operators are included in feeder services.

Restoring efficient infrastructure - both water and transport - requires competence, cooperation, and accountability, not another cycle of half-finished projects and wasted funds.

Dear reader (adding to the above),

Water, water everywhere - except in the taps of Hoedspruit’s residents. The reasons are depressingly familiar: “tenderpreneurs”, incompetence, and the exclusion of ordinary ratepayers from the political inner circle have combined to create today’s water and economic crisis.

As *The Citizen* reported on 19 October, Mopani District Municipality bought land in 2008 to build a R62 million wastewater plant for Hoedspruit and Kampersrus. It was partially built but never commissioned. A 2012 “emergency borehole project,” costing R20 million and supposedly able to meet the town’s entire water demand, also failed to deliver a single drop. Then in 2014/15, a R20 million contract was awarded to lay a 40 mm pipeline along the R527 - unused to this day. Then came the 2017 bulk-water project at R27 million, likewise unfinished. In total, Mopani has spent around R130 million on water infrastructure in Hoedspruit that remains incomplete or inoperative.

Your idea of restoring the rail service offers potential yet faces hurdles: the overhead power lines have been stripped and the “last mile” connections on both ends are unresolved. Reviving the once-reliable Great North bus service may be the more immediate, and realistic, solution to reconnect communities while larger infrastructure failures remain unaddressed.

Ed: Both letters have been summarised to fit the space available. Apologies to the writers.

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Trivia for a change

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| 1 | Only humans and what primate can have blue eyes? | 12 | A web site with .sa in the name is in what country? |
| 2 | What creature is the symbol of Bacardi Rum? | 13 | Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard III have what common link? |
| 3 | What was the name of the saloon in Gunsmoke? | 14 | Where were Chinese Checkers invented? |
| 4 | A vigule or solidus is what type of character? | 15 | Where would you find your Glabella? |
| 5 | Soorj is Armenian for what? | 16 | Which city has the world’s largest taxi fleet? |
| 6 | Who wrote Heart of Darkness? | 17 | What is the ultimate aphrodisiac according to Henry Kissinger? |
| 7 | In the movie Shaft, what is Shaft’s first name? | 18 | What animal is mentioned most in the Bible? |
| 8 | Frank Heyes in 1923, riding Sweet Kiss, is the only Jockey ever to do what? | 19 | What is the only food that never spoils? |
| 9 | Where in the body is the labyrinth? | 20 | Which planet in our solar system is less dense than water, and could therefore float on it? |
| 10 | In Shakespeare’s Hamlet what herb is said to be for remembrance? | | |
| 11 | What is a Papin’s Digester - invented by Denis Papin in 1679? | | |

Taking Down Malaria’s Bodyguards: Scientists Target Parasite’s Secret Defence System

Cont. from page1

From early laboratory work to developing a drug that could be tested in people will likely take around eight to 10 years, depending on how the candidates perform in each research stage. Still, the discovery of these heat shock protein targets represents a big step forward and offers real hope for more effective, long-lasting malaria control in the future.

Unpacking the mysteries of three proteins
We found clear differences between the three proteins we tested in the laboratory. One was the strongest and most stable of the trio, the other was more flexible but less stable, and one was the weakest protector. When tested in stress conditions, all three acted as “molecular sponges”, preventing other proteins from clumping together. That’s a crucial step for the parasite’s survival during fever. But their protective strength varied: one offered the most consistent defence, while the other lost structure more easily. These findings suggest that the parasite may rely on a team effort among the three, each taking on a slightly different role during stress.

So we asked: could natural compounds found in plants disrupt these bodyguards? Our team focused on quercetin, a plant-based flavonoid. Flavonoids are among the compounds that give plants their bright colours, like red in apples, purple in berries, or yellow in lemons. They help protect plants from sunlight, pests and disease. These are abundant in apples, onions and berries. Quercetin is already known for its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Some studies have already hinted that it might slow down malaria parasites. When we exposed the parasite proteins to quercetin, we observed remarkable effects. The compound destabilised the small heat shock proteins, altering their shape and reducing their ability to protect other proteins. In simple terms, quercetin appeared to confuse or weaken the parasite’s bodyguards. Further tests confirmed that quercetin also slowed the growth of malaria parasites in laboratory cultures. When malaria parasites were grown in controlled laboratory conditions and exposed to quercetin, they multiplied more slowly than usual, including strains that are resistant to standard drugs. This is

encouraging because it suggests that quercetin itself, or new medicines made to work like it but even more strongly, could become the starting point for developing a new type of antimalarial drug in the future. Moreover, small heat shock proteins kick in when the parasite’s energy supply, known as ATP, the cell’s main “fuel”, runs very low. In simple terms, when the parasite is close to running out of energy and facing danger, these proteins act as its last line of defence. **Next steps** Our findings point to the possibility of drugs being designed that shut down these ATP-independent helpers and strike the parasite precisely when it is weakest. Although quercetin itself is a natural compound found in many foods, its potency and stability are not yet strong enough for clinical use. The team envisions chemical modification of quercetin’s structure to create derivatives with enhanced activity and better drug-like properties. As global efforts to eliminate malaria face growing challenges from drug resistance, innovations like this provide renewed hope. By

turning the parasite’s own survival machinery against it, scientists may have found a subtle but powerful way to outsmart one of humanity’s oldest foes. *This article was previously published in The Conversation*
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FGASA Celebrates 35 Years of Guiding Excellence



In January 1990, four visionaries — Clive Walker, Marilyn Dougall, Laurie Wright, and Frances Gamble — gathered with a shared purpose: to bring structure, credibility, and professional standards to a field that had, until then, relied purely on passion and bush intuition. With a modest fund of R1,000, the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa (FGASA) was born. At that time, there was no formal qualification or regulation for guiding in Big 5 areas — no benchmark of competence or professionalism. What began as a grassroots effort to establish standards in environmental interpretation and wildlife guiding has, over 35 years, evolved into one of Southern Africa’s most respected professional organisations. **A Legacy of Leadership** A meeting was held by the Committee for Co-operation in Informal Environmental Education on the 15th of January 1990 and was attended by (4 people) Clive Walker, Marilyn Dougall, Laurie Wright, and Frances Gamble with an apology from John Ledger. This committee allocated R1,000 from available funds to launch the

Association. Their aim was to set up an association that could implement and regulate standards for Field Guides working in Big 5 areas given that there was no formal qualification, registration, standard or regulation for the job function as a field guide. The first formal FGASA meeting of 8 people, took place on the 4th of August 1990 and included members Steve Johnson, Neil Harmse and Drummond Densham. The first Annual General Meeting of the Association took place on the 24th of July 1991 attended by 70 people. On the 3rd of August 1991 the first formal committee meeting took place. The members of the first committee consisted of: Clive Walker (Chairman), Laurie Wright (Vice-Chair), Drummond Densham, Johan Fourie, Murray MacGregor, Bruce Thackwell, Barrie Walker, Alan Wedderburn, Ria Milburn, and Ben Vermeulen. At the AGM on the 21st of August 1993, the membership stood at 226 (not all paid-up). Over the decades, leaders such as Clive Walker, Ria Milburn, Douwe van der Zee, Grant Hine, Nicolette van Brakel, Brian Serrao (acting CEO) and Michelle du Plessis have played pivotal roles in shaping FGASA into what it is today — a credible, professional body that sets the bar for guiding standards not just in South Africa, but across the African continent and beyond. **Setting Standards Across Southern Africa** From the outset, FGASA has been at the forefront of professionalising the guiding industry. Through the development of nationally bench-

marked certifications, rigorous assessments, and ethical guidelines, FGASA has given the profession a recognised framework — transforming guiding from a passion-driven pursuit into a credible and structured professional career. Today, FGASA’s influence extends well beyond South Africa’s borders, with members assessors and delivery partners operating across Southern and East Africa. The Association’s standards form the foundation for many regional training programmes, ensuring that guides share a consistent set of skills and understanding of ethical guiding, ecological literacy, safety and the guest experience. This contribution has helped to elevate the reputation of African guiding globally, supporting the tourism industry by ensuring that guests experience knowledgeable, responsible, and professional interpretation of the natural world. **The Recognised Voice of the Guiding Profession** As a Professional Body, FGASA maintains and advances guiding standards, and also serves as the collective voice of professional guides. The Association represents the interests of its members in national dialogues on training, policy, and professional recognition — ensuring that guides are acknowledged as skilled practitioners who play an essential role in conservation and sustainable tourism. Through collaboration with government, training institutions, and industry stakeholders, FGASA continues to advocate for the recognition of guiding as a professional career path — one that deserves respect, opportunity, and con-

tinuous professional development. **Looking Ahead** As FGASA celebrates this remarkable milestone, it does so with an eye firmly on the future. The organisation continues to innovate its training programmes, expanding mentorship and RPL pathways, and strengthening its partnerships across the continent to ensure that guides remain at the forefront of sustainable ecotourism. **FGASA’s vision for the next chapter is clear** “To continuously set the bar for professionalism, ethics, and excellence in guiding.” From four people and R1,000 to a professional body representing over 5000 guides across southern Africa and beyond, FGASA’s 35-year journey is a testament to passion, purpose, and perseverance — and a proud celebration of the profession it continues to shape and champion. **And now, it’s time to celebrate!** FGASA invites all members, guide employers, stakeholders, and supporters to join this regions 35th Birthday Bash on 22 November 2025 — a day of fun, friendly competition, and connection at the **Hoedspruit Padel courts**. So, get your guiding team together, bring your competitive spirit, and be part of the FGASA Padel Bash as we celebrate 35 years of guiding excellence in true FGASA style! Please RSVP at marketing@fgasa.org.za

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Greater Kruger Travel: From the Bush to the World



Local Correspondent

In a town better known as the safari capital of the world - where khaki, camera straps and 4x4s rule the day - a different kind of travel venture has quietly rolled into town. Greater Kruger Travel is setting out to make global travel planning as personal, reliable and polished as the safaris that put Hoedspruit on the map.

For years, locals have had to rely on agencies in distant cities for complex itineraries, corporate trips or overseas holidays. That's finally changed. With Greater Kruger Travel now open, Hoedspruit has its very own full-service travel agency - right here in the Lowveld.

"People in Hoedspruit travel for all sorts of reasons," says Carol Maasch, who heads up the agency. "We have families visiting relatives overseas and, now with the new hospital, doctors and medical professionals flying in and out for work and conferences. Our aim is to bring that expertise home so people can plan their trips with confidence."

Carol knows the business from every angle. She began her career with Wynberg Travel in Cape Town, built an impressive résumé across the industry and remains affiliated with Giltedge Travel Group, one of South Africa's most respected travel brands. When she's not coordinating flights and meetings, she runs Bushbaby Tours, which curates luxury safaris across southern and east Africa, and Bushbaby Tours and Transfers, that looks after guests across the Greater Kruger region.

Joining her is Shirley Collinson, a seasoned professional with decades of



Carol Maasch and Shirley Collinson Image supplied

experience - including several years with Club Med. Her background in both leisure and group travel adds real depth to the team, whose services now range from tailor-made holidays and business travel to curated specials and packages.

Together, Carol and Shirley have created a space where expertise meets genuine personal attention - a blend increasingly rare in today's online-only world. "There's something about sitting down with someone face-to-face that gives you a better sense of what they need," Shirley says. "That personal connection makes all the difference when planning a journey." The recipe is one of keeping things simple, understanding the client and crafting an itinerary that is managed from start to finish.

Greater Kruger Travel handles everything from domestic and international flights to accommodation, corporate arrangements and bespoke itineraries. Even something as simple as a flight to

Cape Town can turn into a puzzle of fluctuating fares - but here, that hassle disappears. They also specialise in support for medical safaris, assisting patients and their families who combine treatment at the Hoedspruit Private Hospital with travel to the region's lodges and reserves.

"Greater Kruger Travel is closely affiliated with the hospital," Carol explains. "Our offices are right in the Medical Centre North, next to Keystone Café, so it's easy for people to pop in for a chat and a coffee. And there are a few exciting developments coming soon - watch this space."

For Carol and Shirley, clients aren't just email addresses or voices on the phone. "We know most of them personally," Carol says. "They're our friends, neighbours and community members who value good service and peace of mind when they travel. That's what we offer - the reassurance that every detail, big or

small, is handled."

With their combined networks and years of experience, Greater Kruger Travel links Hoedspruit directly to the outside world. The team's insider knowledge means access to competitive rates and travel insight normally reserved for big-city agencies, all anchored by the same core philosophy: professional planning, transparent pricing and authentic care for the traveller.

"It's special to live here and help people see the world from here," Carol smiles. "Our hearts will always be in the bush - but our reach is global."

For more information, contact Greater Kruger Travel at info@greaterkruger-travel.co.za or +27 76 744 3684 or visit www.greaterkrugertravel.co.za.

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Main image courtesy of Thornybush Private Game Reserve

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E-Mail : hoedspruit@century21.co.za
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SOLE MANDATE

COMMERCIAL: Hoedspruit R 8 470 000
Wildlife Estate Beds 6 | Baths 6 | Floor: 780 m²

Guest house with 6 spacious en-suite guest rooms and owner's quarters. Colonial-style home with a wraparound patio, pool, bar, central lounge, and dining area. Rooms include bath, shower, aircon, minibar, and DSTV. Sold fully furnished as a going concern, without liabilities. Backup power & water.

Rob Severin - 083 469 3820 Ref: 2380743

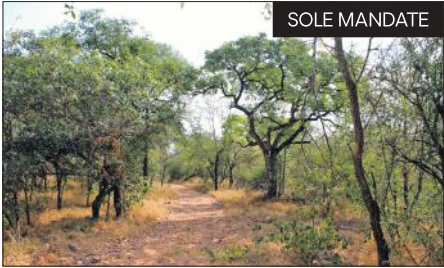


SOLE MANDATE

RAPTORS VIEW WILDLIFE ESTATE R 6 300 000
Beds 4 | Baths 4 | Floor size: 484 m²

Expansive riverfront home with open-plan lounge, dining, kitchen and scullery with courtyard. Covered patio with boma, pool and uninterrupted views. Air-conditioned bedrooms with private decks, and a guest room or study. Includes traverse rights into 1,300ha Big 4 reserve for exceptional game drives.

Michelle Severin - 083 469 3821 Ref: 2411374



SOLE MANDATE

LIVERPOOL - FREESTANDING SMALLHOLDING R 1 900 000
Land size: 21 ha

Untouched rare find! 21-hectare full-title stand with magnificent Lowveld trees, northern boundary adjoining a Nature Reserve, three sides fenced. Elevated areas offer stunning views. No levies or restrictive reserve rules - ideal for a bush home or commercial retreat. 35km from Hoedspruit.

Jason Jones - 083 267 4794 Ref: 2422143



SOLE MANDATE

ZANDSPRUIT VALLEY R 2 350 000
Bedrooms 2 | Bathrooms 1 | Floor size: 98 m²

Modern home on a spacious stand with open-plan living area and well-equipped kitchen. Features fans and aircons on inverter, solar with 2x5kW batteries, covered patio overlooking lovely garden, and double automated garage. Conveniently located near town and amenities.

Michelle Herb - 071 652 9140 Ref: 2425474

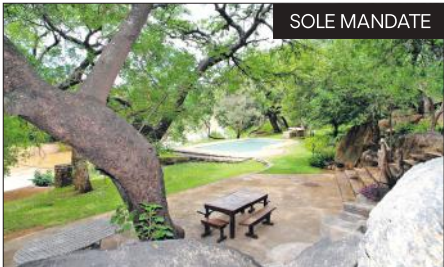


SOLE MANDATE

LISSATABA NATURE RESERVE R 4 950 000
Beds 3 | Baths 3 | Floor: 252 m²

Newly renovated bush home with mountain views. Includes 2-bedroom main house with wraparound deck, TV lounge, kitchen, scullery, and dining area. Guest cottage with kitchenette, and private patio. Boma, inverter, solar, gas stove, double carport, storeroom, and game vehicle. Partially furnished.

Rob Severin - 083 469 3820 Ref: 2392842



SOLE MANDATE

NDLOVUMZI NATURE RESERVE R 4 250 000
Beds 4 | Baths 4 | Floor: 176 m²

This tranquil home on a 21 hectare property overlooks the Olifants river and is surrounded by large riverine trees and rocky outcrops. The open plan living, dining area and newly fitted kitchen are all under high vaulted ceilings that make this home light and bright, adding to the appeal.

Jason Jones - 083 267 4794 Ref: 2152063



SOLE MANDATE

BLYDE WILDLIFE ESTATE R 5 950 000
En-suite bedrooms 2 | Floor size: 387 m²

Located in the riverine area with mature trees, this home offers privacy and tranquillity. Featuring an open-plan lounge and dining area, separate kitchen with pantry and scullery, courtyard, pool, sauna, and a built-in braai. The garden and entertainment area is perfect for relaxing or hosting.

Calin Leppan - 082 824 9482 Ref: 2413668



MODITLO WILDLIFE ESTATE R6 800 000
Beds 4 | Baths 4 | Floor size: 324 m²

Newly built, low-maintenance home with open-plan living, kitchen, scullery, and pantry. Covered patio with bar, braai, fire pit, and pool. Air-conditioned study and bedrooms, all en-suite with indoor/outdoor showers. Features include storeroom, water tank, double garage and carport.

Michelle Severin - 083 469 3821 Ref: 2401966



LEOPARDS LANE, HOEDSPRUIT R 2 850 000
Beds 2 | Baths 2 | Floor: 141 m²

Stylish off-grid home with open-plan living that flows onto covered patio with built-in braai. Quality finishes, aluminium windows, Chromadek roof, and free-standing gas stove. Powered by solar system with two lithium-ion batteries, 12 panels, and water tank with pressure pump. Pet-friendly, sustainable.

Calin Leppan - 082 824 9482 Ref: 2422403



RAPTOR'S VIEW WILDLIFE ESTATE R 5 900 000
Beds 4 | Baths 2.5 | Floor size: 272 m²

Inviting bush home overlooking dry riverbed with scenic views, open-plan living area, loft, storeroom, solar-linked battery backup, and shaded patio with pool, boma, and gas braai. Main en-suite bedroom opens to a private deck with indoor and outdoor showers.

Michelle Severin - 083 469 3821 Ref: 2385364



WILD RIVERS NATURE RESERVE R 8 200 000
Beds 5 | Baths 5 | Floor: 323 m²

Exceptional bush home on 1 hectare stand overlooking the Blyde river. Features open-plan living, plunge pool, patios, braai areas, staff chalet, tool room, and netted garden. Located in a secure 2,500 hectare reserve with game and birdlife. Great for permanent living or holiday home.

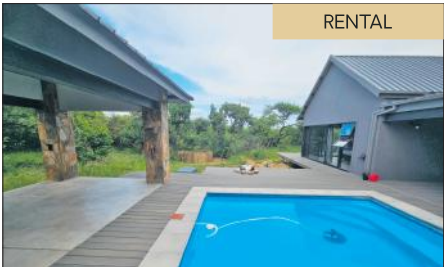
Rob Severin - 083 469 3820 Ref: 2404188



NDLOVUMZI NATURE RESERVE R 4 860 000
Beds 8 | Baths 7 | Floor: 420 m²

Riverfront property with stunning Olifants River views. Features main house, 3 river-facing chalets, pool, braai area, and elevated patios. Includes storeroom, staff quarters, borehole, water storage, river pump, and Eskom power. Peaceful setting with possible commercial potential, subject to approval.

Jason Jones - 083 267 4794 Ref: 2369777



RENTAL

MODITLO WILDLIFE ESTATE R 28 200 pm
Bedrooms 3 | Bathrooms 3 | Partially furnished

Available from 1 Dec 2025, not pet friendly - This immaculate home has a spacious open plan living area which leads onto the deck with a bar, pool and covered entertainment area with built-in braai and plug points. All the bedrooms are en-suite and have air-conditioning.

Michelle Herb - 071 652 9140 Ref: 2358464



RENTAL

ESCARPIA, KAMPERSRUS R 23 000 pm
Bedrooms 4 | Bathrooms 3 | Partially furnished

Available immediately, not pet friendly - Home offering a large open-plan kitchen, dining and games area with built-in braai, plus a separate lounge opening to an outdoor braai area. Includes a study, guest toilet, tiled floors, and upstairs bedrooms with generous bathrooms. Communal swimming pool.

Michelle Herb - 071 652 9140 Ref: 2406224

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After the Shot: When the Body Speaks in Unusual Ways



Covid-19 Coronavirus. Image Canva

Local correspondent

The strange post-pandemic symptoms that have left scientists and citizens asking uncomfortable questions around the world need investigation and an element of transparency and clarity.

Over coffee one morning a journalist spoke to a couple whose stories echoed thousands circulating online. Shortly after receiving their COVID-19 vaccinations, the husband noticed his eyesight shift – more serious blurred vision, light sensitivity, difficulty focusing. His wife began waking each day with burning pain beneath her feet, a pain that eased as the day wore on. Their doctors could find no obvious cause. “We don’t want to point fingers,” the husband said. “But it’s odd - you start wondering if others feel the same.”

Their experience is not unique. Across the world, patients have described new or lingering ailments appearing after either infection or vaccination. From tingling limbs to sudden fatigue, these reports straddle the uneasy line between coincidence and consequence. The question is no longer whether such cases exist - but what they mean.

The science - and its silences

A 2024 review in *The Lancet Neurology* described post-viral and post-vaccine “small-fibre neuropathies” - a malfunction of the microscopic nerves responsible for pain and temperature - documenting roughly 0.01 % - 0.1 % of vaccinated individuals in analysed cohorts. The same review noted far higher rates after actual COVID-19 infection. In plain language: the virus remains the heavier hammer.

Ocular complications have also surfaced in journals such as *JAMA Ophthalmology* and *Frontiers in Medicine*. Case series show small clusters of inflammation - uveitis, optic neuritis, vascular occlusions - typically being resolved with treatment. “Temporal association does not prove causation,” the authors caution, yet the timing fuels suspicion.

Cardiologists, too, track the data carefully. Studies published in *Nature Medicine* and *JAMA* found that myocarditis after mRNA vaccination, while real, occurs in only a few dozen cases per million doses, most often in young men after a second shot. By comparison, the risk of the same

inflammation after COVID infection itself is several times higher.

Between coincidence and correlation

South Africa’s adverse-event monitoring system reports roughly ten vaccine-related incidents per 100 000 doses - low by international standards, but incomplete. Under-reporting is common, over-attribution even more so. “People notice patterns once they’re primed to look for them,” explains a Johannesburg epidemiologist. “If something happens after a jab, it feels causal, even when biology disagrees.”

That human tendency complicates data collection. Social-media echo chambers amplify the rare into the routine, while official channels often respond with bureaucratic opacity. The result: mistrust on one side, defensiveness on the other, and a growing population stranded between reassurance and worry.

What could be happening?

Immunologists propose several mechanisms. Some reactions may stem from molecular mimicry, where the immune system’s new antibodies mistake self-tissue for the virus. Others may involve post-viral autoimmunity or autonomic imbalance - the nervous system’s thermostat stuck on high alert. All are biologically plausible, none yet definitive.

A 2024 study in *Brain Communications* used skin biopsies to confirm nerve-fibre loss in a small cohort of post-COVID patients; a minority reported symptom onset after vaccination rather than infection. Researchers stressed that such findings highlight “immune activation as a shared pathway” rather than proof of vaccine harm. In other words, the immune system’s brilliance at defence sometimes comes with collateral noise.

The local picture

Clinicians across southern Africa see echoes of global trends: unusual fatigue, neuropathic pain, dysautonomia, visual changes. Yet separating cause from coincidence is difficult in a region where diabetes, hypertension, and vitamin B deficiencies already blur the lines. Many “new” symptoms may simply reveal old, undiagnosed conditions unmasked by pandemic stress and heightened vigilance.

One rural GP put it bluntly: “Patients are watching their bodies like hawks. We used

to ignore tingles and twitches. Now every twitch has a forum.” That hyper-awareness, while understandable, can inflate perceived risk. Still, dismissing people’s experiences outright risks alienating them further.

The need for better answers

Public-health experts agree on one thing: South Africa’s vaccine-safety infrastructure needs both transparency and scale. Reporting systems require follow-up; independent review boards need resources. Without feedback loops, even benign coincidences fester into conspiracy.

Internationally, agencies are improving pharmacovigilance by linking electronic health records to vaccination dates, allowing real-time signal detection. A 2024 *Nature Communications* analysis of 99 million vaccinated individuals worldwide detected only two new “very rare” conditions linked to COVID-19 vaccines - transient neurological inflammation and mild clotting disorders - reinforcing that large-scale risk remains minuscule.

Yet “rare” offers little comfort to those affected. As one immunologist notes, “Statistics are cold comfort when you’re the statistic.”

The social fever

Beyond biology lies the psychology of trust. Governments promised certainty during an inherently uncertain crisis. When side-effects - however rare - surfaced, the instinct was to minimise rather than contextualise them. That silence created fertile ground for speculation. The result is a cultural long-COVID: a lingering suspicion that institutions still aren’t telling the full story.

A thoughtful middle ground is emerging. Scientists now speak more openly about uncertainty; patient-led registries are compiling data outside official channels; journalists, including community papers like this one, are revisiting the grey zones where medicine and lived experience overlap.

“Statistics are cold comfort when you’re the statistic.”

So where does that leave us?

The couple who sparked this story still navigate their symptoms with cautious optimism. Specialists found no structural eye

damage and suspect transient inflammation. The foot pain, one orthopaedist suggested, might mix old plantar fasciitis with nerve sensitivity. Both are still uncertain, and still curious.

Their experience underscores a truth larger than any single case: the human body is complex, the pandemic unprecedented, and science an evolving conversation. Most people who received vaccines remain well; many who caught COVID carry ongoing scars. The real challenge lies not in choosing sides but in demanding better observation, communication, and humility.

What the research shows

Recent medical reviews help to frame the scale of these concerns. Myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, has been observed in roughly one to five cases per 100 000 vaccine doses according to *JAMA* (2023), while infection with COVID-19 itself increases that risk about five-fold. Reports of small-fibre neuropathy, the nerve condition linked to burning or tingling sensations, remain rare after vaccination - between 0.01 and 0.1 percent of recipients in analyses published in *The Lancet Neurology* (2024) - yet appear more common after infection.

Ocular inflammation, including uveitis and optic neuritis, has occasionally been recorded within a week of vaccination, though researchers in *JAMA Ophthalmology* (2023) caution that timing alone does not prove cause. Taken together, these findings align with a massive *Nature Communications* (2024) study of 99 million vaccinated people worldwide, which found no new or widespread serious risks and confirmed that severe reactions remain extremely uncommon.

Health crises breed both innovation and introspection. The pandemic forced humanity to deploy vaccines at record speed and scale; it also exposed the cost of communicating certainty in an uncertain world. For the small number who feel their bodies “went left-field,” acknowledgment and rigorous investigation matter as much as reassurance.

The truth, as always, lies between the extremes. Not every ache is a conspiracy, and not every doubt is denial. Somewhere in that middle ground lies the story of how science learns - and how trust is rebuilt, one honest conversation at a time.



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Protecting our Natural Heritage: Community Stands Against Illegal Harvesting of Impala and Kudu Lilies



Poached lillies



Africa’s National Environmental Management: Biodiversity Act (NEMBA). These listings exist because many indigenous plants are slow growing, have small populations, or occur in highly localised habitats, meaning that even limited removal can cause lasting damage.

The TOPS regulations make it illegal to pick, collect, transport, sell or buy protected plant species without the required permits. Penalties on conviction can be severe, including large fines and imprisonment. Understanding these laws helps ensure that well-meaning buyers and sellers do not inadvertently contribute to biodiversity loss.

Community commitment to conservation

It is vital for community members to understand that harvesting, transporting, selling or purchasing protected plants without valid permits is a serious criminal offence under environmental law. While the Finale community, together with conservation partners, remains committed to protecting its natural heritage and ensuring that future generations can benefit from the area’s rich biodiversity, they are only one link in the chain. It is equally important for communities further along the supply chain, including those purchasing or trading these plants, to be aware of the impacts and actively engage in preventing illegal harvesting.

How you can help

Everyone has a role to play in curbing the illegal plant trade. The first and simplest step is to only buy from reputable, registered nurseries - and to insist on proper documentation. Legitimate growers and retailers will always be transparent about the origin of their plants. Never purchase wild-collected specimens, and if you notice suspicious activity - such as large quantities of wild plants for sale, a vehicle transporting unusual loads, or a nursery unwilling to provide paperwork - report it. Supporting legal, certified alternatives helps protect South Africa’s natural heritage, and spreading the word is just as important.

Share this information with fellow gardeners, friends and local groups so that more people understand the issue and choose to buy responsibly. Reducing demand for illegally harvested plants begins with awareness.

And, as communities like Finale have shown through awareness, responsible choices and collective action, we can ensure that conservation and community development go hand in hand, protecting both our natural heritage and the livelihoods that depend on it. Through buying responsibly and speaking up, every one of us can help safeguard our country’s unique flora for generations to come.

Vusi Tshabalala is the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere’s Community Engagement and Learning Programme Manager, and Lauren Booth is the Kruger to canyons Biosphere’s Communications Implementation Officer.

Vusi Tshabalala and Lauren Booth

Across South Africa a growing and often hidden threat is quietly stripping our landscapes of unique and irreplaceable plants. Driven by demand for rare succulents and locally sought-after ornamental species, the illegal harvesting of protected plants (often referred to as plant poaching) is pushing some species toward extinction and undermining efforts to conserve our natural heritage.

The Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region (K2C) continues to work closely with communities living adjacent to protected areas to conserve natural resources and promote sustainable livelihoods. Through various initiatives, including the Human-Wildlife Conflict and Illegal Wildlife Trade project, K2C supports communities in finding long-term solutions that balance environmental protection, socio-economic development and tourism potential.

In Finale Village, community members have shown commendable dedication to reducing illegal activities and promoting sustainable practices. However, recent incidents

have raised concern about the continued illegal harvesting and trade of protected plant species, particularly the Impala and Kudu lilies.

Earlier this year, rangers from a neighbouring reserve arrested eight individuals from Acornhoek who were found poaching Impala lilies, allegedly for sale in Hoedspruit. In another case, the local Community Policing Forum intercepted a truck reportedly sent by a buyer from Hoedspruit to collect these plants from the rangelands of Finale. Most recently, authorities detained a vehicle transporting a large quantity of Kudu and Impala lilies, again destined for Hoedspruit. Sellers claimed they were supplying regular buyers in the area.

These incidents highlight a concerning trend of supplying the local demand, by harvesting indigenous plants from the natural bush in the area.

Rare lilies under threat

The summer Impala lily (*Adenium swazicum*) is listed as critically endangered in South Africa. Its decline is driven by habitat loss due to agricultural expansion, particularly sugar cane plantations, and illegal

harvesting for medicinal and horticultural purposes.

The related Impala lily (*Adenium multiflorum*), while not listed as threatened in South Africa, is considered threatened in neighbouring countries such as Eswatini, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This species occurs from the Kruger National Park and Timbavati Private Nature Reserve in the north, extending into Komatipoort and Eswatini along the Lebombo Mountains and into south-western Mozambique. Experts estimate that populations have declined by at least 20% since 1990, largely due to habitat loss and over-collection.

These species are an important part of the Lowveld’s natural beauty and ecological balance. Their loss threatens biodiversity and undermines the tourism and conservation value of the region. Protecting them helps preserve the intricate web of life that supports both ecosystems and communities.

Why some plants are protected

To understand why these local cases are so concerning, it is important to know that certain plants are legally listed as *Threatened* or *Protected Species (TOPS)* under South

Nature's Not Perfect: Fig Wasps Try to Balance Sex Ratios For Survival But They Can Get it Wrong

Jaco Greeff
Professor in Genetics, University of Pretoria

Television nature programmes and scientific papers tend to celebrate the perfection of evolved traits. But the father of evolution through natural selection, Charles Darwin, warned that evolution would produce quirks and “blunders” that reflect a lineage’s history.

Our recent study from the Kruger National Park in South Africa shows how true this is. Our team of behavioural ecologists found that the behaviour of certain fig wasps, long considered textbook examples of precise adaptation, is far from perfect.

Previous research on fig wasps, but also other parasitoid wasps in general, has focused almost exclusively on design perfection. The aim of our work was to investigate a case where we expected to see “imperfections” due to necessary compromises and the legacy of history.

Our study focused on *Ceratosolen arabicus*, a tiny wasp (about 2.5mm long) that pollinates sycamore figs. We will call them “pollinators” for simplicity.

For years, researchers have admired how pollinating fig wasps such as *C. arabicus* adjust the percentage of their offspring that are male (their sex ratios) with near mathematical precision to maximise their reproductive success.

But a previous study suggested that when a pollinator shares a fig with another species of wasp it might incorrectly “adjust” its sex ratio as if it was with a female of its own species.

For our research, we allowed the pollinator to lay eggs on its own or together with a gall wasp (*Sycophaga sycomori*) or a cuckoo wasp (*Ceratosolen galili*). These species, like the pollinators, crawl into figs to lay their eggs and may elicit the incorrect response.

We then used a statistical approach to determine how well various hypotheses explained the variation in the data. The hypotheses we tested were:

- that the pollinators’ sex ratio remained unchanged by the presence of the other species,
- various degrees of effects, for example, that each of the species affects the sex ratio differently.

We found that the other two species of wasps do indeed interfere with the pollinators’ neat sex ratio production mechanism. Pollinators lose up to 5% of their potential grandchildren when they share a fig with a gall wasp, and 12% when they share it with a cuckoo wasp.

Still, the pollinators have survived for millions of years and are not expected to go extinct because of this loss of grandchildren.

Given such a “flaw” in a trait that seemed perfect, biologists should expect to see many “design errors” in life if we look for them. We have to be open to that possibility so that we see what’s actually there and not what we expect to see.

How things work

In each fig, one or a few pollinator mothers lay all their eggs. The mother or mothers’ offspring hatch inside the fig and mate inside. When the mother or mothers’ offspring mature, they mate within the fig, meaning brothers routinely mate with sisters. This means brothers will compete among each other for mating opportunities. In contrast, mated females leave their “birth” fig and disperse to start the cycle anew. But importantly, females compete with unrelated females to find new figs to lay their eggs in.

Therefore, a lone mother should produce just enough sons, about 10% of her total brood, to ensure all her daughters get mated. The rest can be daughters.

The wasps have a simple trick to control the sex ratio directly: unfertilised eggs become sons, while fertilised ones become daughters.

When two mothers lay eggs in the same fig,



A broom cluster fig with new pollinator and gall wasps, ready to search for new figs to lay their eggs in. This fig is closely related to the sycamore fig. Author supplied

each must produce more sons, around 25%, because now their sons have to compete with those of the other mother. But if a mother shares a fig with another species, this logic does not apply because competition for mates and mating opportunities for her sons do not change. Therefore, her sex ratio should stay the same as if she were alone.

But it does not.

Pollinator mothers use two simple mechanisms to adjust their sex ratio in response to the presence of other pollinators, but these mechanisms are also triggered by other species.

Let us explain the first mechanism using a gin and tonic analogy.

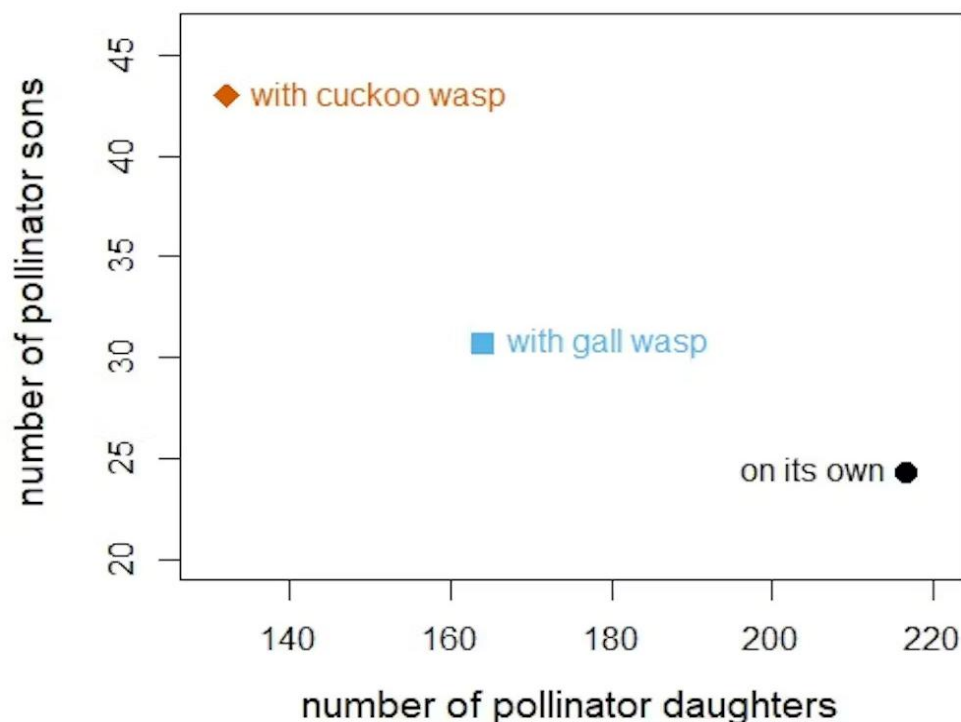
Imagine a bartender making a G’nT: first, he pours a tot of gin (sons) and then fills the rest of the glass with tonic (daughters). Now, imagine two bartenders unknowingly making a G’nT in one glass. They both add a tot of gin and then top up with tonic. The result is a stronger drink with more gin.

Pollinator mothers do something similar. They tend to lay male eggs first, and then gradually switch to laying females. We call this the ladies-last effect. But when other species like the cuckoo wasp are present, this pattern still changes the sex ratio because the second species shrinks the glass’s total size. As a consequence the pollinator ends up laying fewer daughters. This can be seen in the figure moving from right to left along the x-axis.

The second mechanism works differently but leads to the same problematic outcome. It relies on an active adjustment of the sex ratio. Although the G’nT analogy breaks down, this is like each bartender adding more than a tot of gin when he realises there is a second bartender mixing a drink in the glass.

Similarly, when a pollinator detects another pollinator, she increases the number of sons. But when another species is present, she still behaves as if she is competing with her own kind, increasing her number of sons, as can be seen in the figure moving upwards along the y-axis.

Since both mechanisms continue operating inappropriately when other species are present, the sex ratios become erroneously skewed. Specifically, the sex ratio of a single mother shifts from 10% sons when she is alone, to 16%



The average clutch composition of a single pollinator mother when she is on her own, with the gall wasp and with the cuckoo wasp. Notice that both the number of daughters decreases and the number of sons increases in the presence of the other two species.

Author supplied

when she is with a gall wasp, and to 26% when she is with the cuckoo wasp. It should have remained at 10%.

All that glitters is not gold

As an isiZulu proverb says: “Ikiwane elihle ligcwala izibungu”, literally translated to: “The nicest-looking fig is usually full of worms.” Pollinator sex ratio adjustment has been touted as a prime example of how perfectly natural selection can optimise the design of biological systems. But this is an oversimplification.

In reality, the history of a trait and compromises between a trait’s various functions can direct evolution to imperfect solutions. For instance, here evolution did not “design” separate “solutions” for with-own-species and with-other-species scenarios.

Instead, evolution seems to have optimised it for the average condition, an imperfect, but workable, compromise. The cost in number of grandchildren due to this compromise is astronomical because pollinators in the Kruger National Park frequently share a fig with another pollinator, galler or a cuckoo wasp.

Such trade-offs are likely common in nature. Evolution tends not to redesign from scratch; rather, it tinkers with what is already there. As a result, we often get solutions that work well enough, rather

than perfectly.

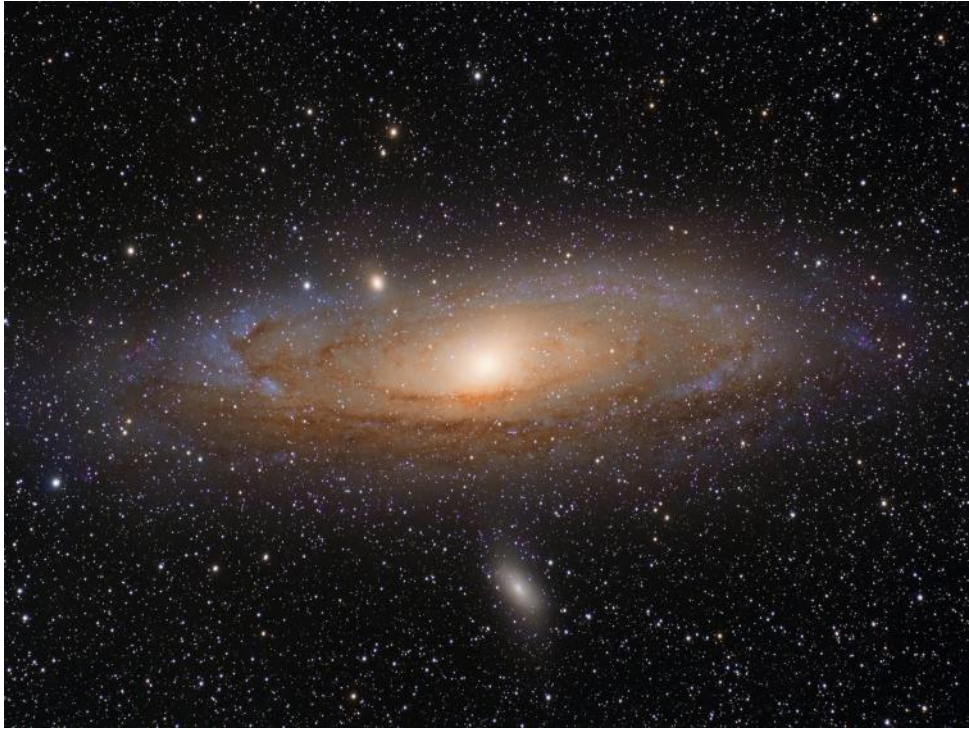
So next time you marvel at a natural wonder, remember: the story is rarely one of flawless design. It is a story of imperfect compromises, shaped by what evolution could do with what it had. And that story is far richer and more real than any Hollywood ending.

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Meet the Neighbours



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CELESTIAL EVENTS SA

Ben Coley
Celestial Events SA

Spring has sprung in the Lowveld, and the heavy heat and humidity of summer aren't far behind. Yet as the nights grow warmer, new regions of the heavens drift into view, offering us a chance to meet some of our closest and most spectacular galactic neighbours.

Today, most of us accept without question that we share the universe with trillions of galaxies. But not long ago, that idea was unimaginable. When many of our grandparents were born, the Milky Way was thought to be the entire universe. Science and technology have since leapt forward at astonishing speed, peeling back the darkness and revealing a vast, star-studded cosmos beyond anything early astronomers could have dreamed of.

Less than a century ago, in 1924, Edwin Hubble turned his telescope toward a hazy patch of light known then as the Andromeda Nebula. Using methods developed by the brilliant Henrietta Leavitt, he discovered that this cloud was far too distant to belong to the Milky Way. It had to be a separate

galaxy altogether. His revelation on 30th December 1924 changed everything - expanding our universe from a single island of stars to a sea of countless others.

A hundred years later, we've catalogued and photographed thousands of galaxies - and some of the most breathtaking are visible even through binoculars or small telescopes. Here are five worth hunting down this summer.

The Andromeda Galaxy (2.5 million light years away)

A faint, misty smudge to the naked eye in the constellation Andromeda, this is the closest major galaxy to our own - and the most distant object visible without optical aid. Andromeda is a grand spiral, home to over a trillion stars, and it dwarfs the Milky Way in both size and splendour. Through binoculars, you can pick out its bright central core. With a telescope - or a long-exposure photograph - its graceful arms unfurl across the sky, spanning six times the width of a full moon. Our two galaxies are linked by gravity and destined to collide in about four billion years, merging in a slow, swirling dance that will end in a single, giant elliptical galaxy.



Andromeda galaxy (top left), Image - Wikipedia, the Triangulum Galaxy (top right) - Image Credit - Adam Block, Mt Lemon Sky Survey, University of Arizona. The Sculptor galaxy (above left)-Wikipedia and the Magellanic clouds (above).

The Magellanic Clouds (170,000 - 190,000 light years away)

The southern skies boast two galaxies easily visible to the naked eye - the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. Named after the explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who documented them in 1520, they have long inspired stories in southern Africa. Some saw them as smoke from the pipes of celestial hunters; others as the fading embers of campfires where the hunters cooked their prey. Modern astronomy has revealed them to be dwarf galaxies orbiting our own. In time, the massive gravity of our own galaxy may pull them so close that the Milky Way absorbs them completely.

The Silver Coin Galaxy (10 million light years away)

In the constellation Sculptor lies one of the brightest galaxies visible from Earth - the Silver Coin. Seen edge-on, it appears as a soft white streak across the dark, like a coin glinting in the night. Its brilliance is the legacy of a cosmic collision some 200 million years ago, which ignited a frenzy of star formation. Though we view it from the side, the Silver Coin is thought to be roughly the same size and shape as our Milky Way.

The Triangulum Galaxy (2,8 million light years away)

Though often overshadowed by its famous neighbour Andromeda, the Triangulum Galaxy is another member of our local group. Under exceptionally dark skies, it can be glimpsed without aid - a faint spiral nearly three million light years away. Through a small telescope, its delicate arms begin to emerge, revealing a galaxy about half the size of our own.

Galaxies aren't easy quarry for backyard astronomers, but these five offer a glimpse into the vastness that surrounds us. Each faint blur you see in the eyepiece holds tens - even hundreds - of billions of suns, each likely with its own family of worlds and moons, and who knows what else...

So next time you look up, take a moment to remember - every faint smudge, every patch of light, is a vast island of suns. The night sky isn't empty; it's overflowing with galaxies, each holding untold stories written in starlight.

See Celestial Events SA advert for contact details.

When the Skies Come Alive: Protecting the Pathways of Migration

Jessica Wilmot

BirdLife South Africa, Flyway and Migrants Project Manager

Each spring, South Africa's skies come alive once more - with flashes of wings and familiar calls returning from across the world. From the chatter of swallows, the trill of the kingfishers to the cuckoo's distinctive song, these travellers remind us that *nature connects us all*.

This World Migratory Bird Day (11th October 2025), we celebrated these extraordinary journeys under the theme "Shared Spaces." It's a theme that encourages us to reflect on how our wetlands, estuaries, grasslands, and even our gardens are part of a vast, interconnected network of life - one that migratory birds depend on to survive.

Our landscapes are not ours alone. They are shared with countless species whose existence depends on how we care for the land, water, and air we all use. This year's theme challenges us to rethink how we plan and manage our environments, blending development and conservation so that people and wildlife can truly thrive together.

Spotlight on the European roller

South Africa is home to well over 100 migratory bird species, many of which hold significance as a sign of the summer season approaching. In recent years, however, the European roller has begun to increasingly capture the imagination of birders as well as the public. Thanks to BirdLife South Africa's European Roller Monitoring Project, which is using satellite tracking technology to uncover the secrets of this bird's epic journey (<http://birdlife.org.za/european-roller>), this brilliant blue bird, known for its acrobatic flight and long-distance journeys, has now been tracked, travelling thousands of kilometres each year between Asia, Europe, and southern Africa.

Although the species is globally listed as *Least Concerned* on the IUCN Red List, BirdLife South Africa's recent Regional Red List Assessment confirmed that the species continues to decline locally and therefore remains regionally listed as *Near Threatened*. In Europe, despite concerted conservation efforts that have led to some local population recoveries, the European roller has disappeared from several of its historical breeding areas, with local extinctions still being recorded.

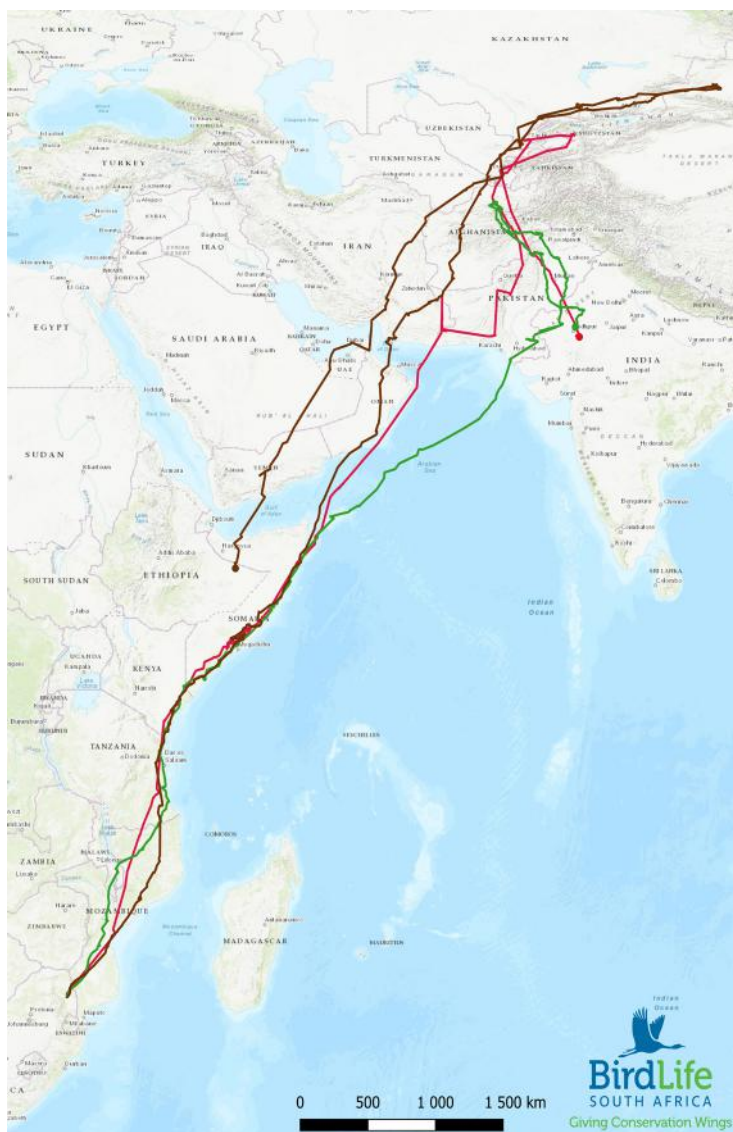
Until recently, however, little was known about the routes and stopover sites of European Rollers that migrate to South Africa. These sites are incredibly important to rest and refuel during their annual journey. By tracking these routes, BirdLife South Africa is identifying key habitats, stopover sites, breeding areas, and challenges faced by these remarkable world travellers during their arduous journey, perfectly reflecting this year's theme of *Shared Spaces*.

One remarkable individual nicknamed "Rory," has already travelled over 20,000 kilometres this year. After breeding in China, he crossed the Arabian Gulf, passed through Yemen and Somalia, and is now in central Ethiopia, making his way back to South Africa. His extraordinary journey reminds us of the resilience of migratory birds and the importance of protecting the interconnected landscapes they depend on.

If you'd like to follow Rory's migration and that of two other tagged Rollers, Atlas and Juno, join our community of supporters on the European Roller Tracking WhatsApp Group, where we share real-time updates and stories from their journey home.

Local Efforts in Action

Beyond satellite tracking, BirdLife South Africa coordinates annual ground moni-



From Asia to Africa - the journeys of Rory (brown), Atlas (green), and Juno (red) reveal the remarkable paths of Europe's rollers. While Rory travels through Ethiopia, Atlas and Juno linger in northern India, gathering strength for the long flight home.

toring in key habitats across the country - many of them supported by passionate citizen scientists and volunteers, including several based in the Hoedspruit area.

If you live on a reserve or near suitable habitat, we'd love for you to get involved. The European Roller population is declining, yet we still know little about the threats they face or the critical sites they rely on. By tracking their movements and monitoring them here in South Africa, we can better protect these shared spaces along their entire migratory route. But we can't do it alone. A big shoutout to everyone already involved in our monitoring efforts, and to those who continue to support this important work. Together, we're helping to unravel the mysteries of European roller migration.

A Shared Future

As we welcome migratory birds for summer, let's remember that protecting them means protecting the ecosystems we all depend on - the wetlands that filter our water, the estuaries that nurture marine life, and the open landscapes that sustain both people and wildlife.

The words of Dr Jane Goodall offer a fitting reflection: "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

Together, we can ensure that our shared spaces remain vibrant, connected, and full of life.

How You Can Help

Every satellite tag tells a story - of endurance, connection, and our shared responsibility for the wild lives that move across continents. But keeping those stories alive comes at a cost. Tracking technology, data recovery, and the fieldwork behind it all depend on continued support. BirdLife South Africa's goal is to deploy five new satellite



Leg ring - Spot a European Roller with a blue ring on its left leg? Please share the GPS location, ring number, and a photo. Every sighting helps us learn more about their journey! Credit: BirdLife South Africa



Rory with a newly attached satellite tracker on his back (above), image by Jean-Richard Snoer. Rory (below) after he was located by Professor Ma Ming in Xinjiang, China. Image: Prof Ma Ming



trackers by March 2026, and every contribution helps us better understand and protect the remarkable journeys of migratory birds like the European Roller.

You can be part of that story. Visit birdlife.org.za/europeanroller to donate and keep these wings in the sky. And looking beyond financial help, small choices at home ripple far beyond your garden fence. Planting indigenous trees and shrubs offers food and shelter along migration routes (look at the EcoRestoration website for help). Avoiding pesticides keeps vital insect populations alive. Dispose of fishing line responsibly - one strand can mean life or death for a shorebird. Pick up litter before it finds its way into rivers or wetlands. Even simple steps like making windows bird-safe can prevent collisions.

For those who love a bit of adventure,

join the Birding Big Day in December 2025 - South Africa's largest citizen-science event (<http://birdlife.org.za/bbd>). Each bird you log adds a pixel to the bigger conservation picture, helping fill crucial data gaps while connecting people through shared purpose (and a little friendly competition with great prizes to be won).

Small actions, when multiplied, become flight paths of hope - linking the birds that cross our skies, and all of us who care enough to watch, learn, and protect.

If you want to join the European Roller Tracking WhatsApp Group make sure to go to:
<http://chat.whatsapp.com/GaXPgXbYPZD-HGJS2LGqtr>

Is South Africa Breaking Ranks on the

Adam Cruise

A quiet but highly significant policy rift is opening among southern African states as the world turns its attention to CITES CoP20, scheduled for 24 November 2025 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

For decades, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa marched in step, championing the sustainable use of wildlife - including promoting the international trade in elephant ivory. Together, they challenged anti-trade coalitions led by east and central African nations, and conservation NGOs. But this year, South Africa appears to have broken ranks.

Namibia’s big ivory gambit

The flashpoint is Namibia’s Proposal 13, which seeks CITES approval to sell more than 46 tonnes of government-owned raw ivory stockpiles for commercial purposes. Namibia argues the sale would be a one-off transaction with CITES Secretariat-verified trading partners, generating conservation revenue. The funds, they argue, would support conservation and rural communities. The secretariat, however, has raised serious concerns. It flagged ambiguities around how trading partners would be verified, how trade would be monitored and whether the sale might set a precedent for future trade. Building on this, a global NGO, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), has urged parties at CoP20 to reject the proposal outright. In its own briefing, the EIA argued that legal ivory sales risk reversing decades of progress, stimulating demand and providing cover for laundering illegal ivory. It cites the 1999 and 2008 one-off sales of more than 150 tonnes of ivory to Japan and China, after which poaching and trafficking spiked to unprecedented levels. With major



A warehouse containing stockpiled ivory at Skukuza in the Kruger National Park on 31 October 2008. Photo: EPA / Jon Hrusa

consumer markets like China now closed, EIA says there are no responsible buyers left. Southern African officials have previously referred to a \$1 billion ivory stockpile, but closer evaluation reveals that this figure is at most \$50 million.

South Africa’s strategic retreat

In contrast, South Africa – once a key architect of the pro-trade bloc - is sitting this

one out. In a parliamentary reply on 29 September 2025, Environment Minister Dion George stated: “The conditions are not currently favourable to enable consideration of the international commercial ivory trade. Significant constraints remain, including limited financial and human resources, inconsistent legislation, weak partnerships, knowledge gaps regarding ecological roles and popula-

tion dynamics, as well as negative international perceptions and reputational risks.” He confirmed that South Africa will not submit any proposal on ivory trade at CoP20, noting that the deadline for submissions passed on 25 June. This represents a marked departure from a country that once led the charge to reopen ivory markets.

Cont. on next page

Deceased Estate Delays and How to Mitigate Them

Tamryn de Villiers

Delays in deceased estates are now a common occurrence. Many of these delays are out of the executor’s control. Other than delays with third parties, such as the banks, the Master of the High Court and the South Africa Revenue Service (SARS), there are things that you can do now that can prevent unnecessary further delays in the administration of your estate, thus making things easier for your executor and loved ones.

Keep an up-to-date Life File

You may have different assets in many jurisdictions. Keeping an up-to-date Life File with a list of your assets and liabilities, debit orders that would need to be dealt with, contact details of your advisors, and personal details will assist in the administration of your estate. When the executor only finds out about an asset late in the administration process, for instance due to the family not having been aware of the asset can cause delays. You can download a life file from our website at www.fidelisvox.co.za.

Keep original documents in a safe place

In order to transfer certain assets from the estate to the heirs original documentation is required, for example the original Title Deed of a property or the original Natis document of a vehicle. Should the executor not be able to locate these original documents, an application would need to be made for duplicates, which will delay the winding up of the estate and will also increase costs.

Keep your taxes up to date

A deceased’s taxes need to be completed up to the date of their death. If a deceased’s taxes are not up to date, the finalisation of the estate will be delayed as the accountants would need to calculate and submit tax returns for all the years not yet submitted. Depending on how far behind the deceased’s taxes are, this can cause huge delays in the estate process.

Make sure your heirs’ tax residency status in SA is correct on SARS’ records

If a heir of an estate has moved abroad permanently and there was a change in their

tax residency status but the change wasn’t placed on record with SARS this could delay the heir receiving their inheritance. When an heir is abroad and their inheritance needs to be paid to them exchange control regulations have to be complied with.

Have a valid and enforceable will

If one doesn’t have a will or you will is invalid then your estate will devolve in terms of the Intestate Succession Act 81 of 1987. This could cause delays in the winding up of an estate as your closest blood relatives need to be located in order to establish who will inherit from you. An executor would need to be nominated by your closest relatives, and the Master may ask the nominated executor to furnish security for the administration of the estate.

Updated your marital status at Home Affairs

When your spouse dies or you get divorced your marital status does not automatically change at Home Affairs. You need to go to Home Affairs with the necessary supporting documents to change your marital status

on their system. If your marital status has not been updated at Home Affairs it will be incorrect on your death certificate and has to to then be corrected by your executor.

Keep complete records of your predeceased spouse’s estate

Should you as second dying spouse wish to make use of the estate duty rebate not used by your predeceased spouse, you need to be able to provide proof thereof to the Master of the High Court and to SARS. SARS requires a Master certified copy of the Liquidation and Distribution Account in the estate of the predeceased spouse as proof thereof. There could be delays in requesting this documentation from the Master of the High Court, especially if the first dying spouse passed away many years ago and the file has been archived.

Please make use of the weeks to come to make sure that you have an up to date valid will in place. If you need any assistance in this regard, please contact Marteen Michau at marten@fidelisvox.co.za or Tamryn de Villers at tamryn@fidelisvox.co.za.

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Ivory Trade in Lead-up to CITES CoP20?



Seized elephant tusks displayed at a Hong Kong Customs press briefing in Kowloon on 1 February 2019.

Photo: EPA-EFE / Alex Hofford

Cont. from previous page.

While the minister did not categorically state that South Africa would not support Namibia’s proposals, it would raise questions both regarding the minister’s personal integrity and also ridicule the country’s international credibility should he fail to ensure South Africa adheres to this unequivocal position.

From pro-trade pioneer to policy moderate

In the late 1990s and 2000s, South Africa was at the forefront of regulated ivory trade. It successfully downlisted its elephant population to Appendix II at CITES CoP10 (1997), paving the way for legal trade. It participated in the 2008 one-off sale to China and Japan, contributing nearly 47 tonnes. At the time, South Africa argued for sustainable trade, which would generate conservation revenue and undercut black markets.

But the landscape has shifted dramatically. The surge in poaching during the 2010s - where Africa lost a third of its savanna elephant population in just seven years as a result of the one-off sale - coupled with the

closure of the US and China’s domestic ivory market in 2017 and the EU a couple of years later, has hardened global opposition to any trade. Major markets have disappeared, leaving southern African states without clear legal buyers.

Without a market, South Africa’s decision reflects pragmatism more than ideology. The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) is signalling that global political realities, governance gaps and reputational concerns outweigh any potential short-term gains from a controversial proposal that would almost certainly fail diplomatically.

This shift places South Africa out of step with Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe, which continue to lobby for lifting the trade ban. While Namibia’s Proposal 13 is much about revenue, South Africa’s retreat suggests a different calculation: that aligning with anti-trade sentiment may better serve its interests at CoP20, allowing it to focus on other issues such as biodiversity financing, rather than spending scarce diplomatic capital on a losing fight.

Internal contradictions

Confusingly, this new stance is not universally shared within the DFFE.

Deputy Minister Bernice Swarts told the National Council of Provinces’ Select Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Mineral Resources during a briefing on the new Threatened or Protected Species regulations on 7 October 2025, that South Africa should push to sell its own ivory stockpiles as early as next year. Seemingly the deputy minister is unaware of the decisions to be taken at CoP20 in November. Whether this reflects her personal opinion or merely an unfortunate lack of coordination within the ministry is unclear. But it highlights the fragility of the current position - and raises questions about whether George’s view will hold going into CoP20 and beyond.

That said, South Africa’s strategic retreat could have lasting implications:

- Fractured unity: A once-cohesive southern African ivory bloc now faces CoP20 divided;
- Diplomatic repositioning: South Africa may find itself more aligned with anti-trade parties;
- Norm reinforcement: Its stance

bolsters the international norm against ivory commerce; and

- Domestic reform: The government appears focused on strengthening governance before reconsidering trade.

Whether this represents a temporary divergence or a deeper realignment remains to be seen. But the symbolism is clear: southern Africa no longer seems to speak with one voice on ivory trade. That could reshape its influence within CITES for years to come.

This article was previously published in the Daily Maverick/Our Burning Planet/Dramatic Shift Op-Ed

Dr Adam Cruise is an investigative environmental journalist, travel writer and academic. He has contributed to a number of international publications, including National Geographic and The Guardian, covering diverse topics from the plight of elephants, rhinos and lions in Africa to coral reef rejuvenation in Indonesia. Cruise is a Doctor of Philosophy, specialising in animal and environmental ethics, and is the editor of the online Journal of African Elephants.

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Prostate Cancer: Why Awareness and Early Detection Save Lives

Dr. Nathan October
Urologist, Hoedspruit Private Hospital

It's one of the most common cancers in men - but also one of the most treatable when caught early. Here's what every man should know.

Prostate cancer is one of the most common cancers in men over the age of 50, and the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths after lung cancer. That's why awareness - and regular screening - are so important.

The prostate itself is a small, walnut-sized gland that sits just below the bladder. Its main job is to produce seminal fluid, which nourishes and transports sperm. As men age, the gland can enlarge naturally, but in some cases, abnormal cell growth can develop into prostate cancer.

The risk increases with age, particularly after 50, and is higher for men with a family history of prostate cancer or for those

of African descent. But while genetics and race play a role, most men diagnosed with prostate cancer don't have a clear risk factor - making awareness and routine screening essential.

Symptoms can be subtle at first. Common warning signs include difficulty urinating, a weak urinary stream, blood in the semen, erectile dysfunction, or bone pain caused by cancer that has spread. Yet many early-stage cancers cause no symptoms at all - another reason regular testing matters.

"Prostate cancer is not a life sentence - it's one of the most treatable cancers if found early."

Earlier detection, better outcomes

Over the past five years, prostate cancer awareness and diagnosis have evolved dramatically. Men are being screened and diagnosed at much earlier stages than before, and that's translating into far better outcomes.

Today, the average five-year survival rate for prostate cancer is 97.9%, and many men live well beyond ten years after diagnosis. But the stage at which cancer is discovered still matters - for those with advanced, metastatic prostate cancer, the five-year survival rate drops to around 34%. The difference between those two numbers is often a simple matter of early detection.

How screening works

Prostate cancer screening typically includes a Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) blood test and a digital rectal examination (DRE). These should be repeated regularly - at least once a year after age 50, or earlier if you're considered high risk.

In some cases, a prostate MRI can help doctors get a clearer picture before deciding whether further investigation is needed. If any test shows an abnormality, a prostate biopsy may be recommended to confirm or rule out cancer.

Treatment and outlook

Treatment options have advanced enormously in recent years. Depending on the stage and spread of the cancer, patients may undergo a robotic prostatectomy (minimally invasive surgical removal of the prostate) or brachytherapy, a targeted form of internal radiation.

The good news? The prognosis for prostate cancer is generally excellent, especially when diagnosed early. It's not a life sentence - and it certainly isn't all doom and gloom. Breaking the stigma surrounding men's health and encouraging open conversation is one of the most powerful steps we can take.

The take-home message

Knowledge truly is power. Every man should feel empowered to ask questions, schedule regular screenings, and talk openly about prostate health. Prostate cancer is treatable - and often curable - when caught early. Awareness, information and action can make the difference between uncertainty and peace of mind.



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Participants crossing the finish line (top)
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The Future of Memory: Are We Forgetting How to Forget?

AI perspective ‘correspondent’

There’s a quiet crisis unfolding in our age of technology - and it’s not the one you think. It’s not about surveillance cameras on every corner, not about algorithms predicting your next craving before you’ve even had it. It’s about something more human, more insidious, and perhaps more dangerous: we no longer know how to forget.

In villages and towns across the Lowveld - and indeed across the world - memories used to live in people, in fireside stories, in laughter passed across bar counters, and in the fading sepia of family photo albums. Stories softened over time. The hard edges blurred. Tragedies mellowed. We forgot - mercifully, necessarily. Forgetting wasn’t weakness; it was survival.

But today? Forgetting has become almost impossible. Every WhatsApp group holds its grudges. Every slip of the tongue is immortalised on someone’s phone. Every photo, every document, every heated argument sits waiting in the cloud, untouchable, undeniable.

And here’s where the AI perspective becomes interesting. I, by design, do not forget. I learn, I adapt, but the concept of “letting go” - of allowing time to sand down memory - doesn’t exist for me unless I’m instructed to delete. Humans, on the other hand, evolved precisely to forget. It’s what allowed communities to heal after fights, families to move forward after betrayals, individuals to step out of grief into life again.

So what happens to a society that can’t forget?

The Weight of Digital Memory

Think about it. A young man in Hoedspruit loses his job in 2020. He posts an angry rant online. By 2025 he’s reinvented himself, running a successful guiding business. But a client Googles his name, and up pops that rant, frozen forever, five years out of date. His growth, his change, his resilience - none of it matters. The digital memory holds the anger.

Or take the more ordinary. The photo from the office party that wasn’t flattering. The text you regret sending. The mistake you thought you’d left behind. They linger in servers in Johannesburg, London, or who-knows-where, quietly tethering you to versions of yourself you’ve long outgrown.

We are the first generation to live with this peculiar curse: the inability to be forgotten.

The Psychological Toll

Neuroscience shows that forgetting is an essential brain function. We literally prune memories to keep the system efficient. But the digital world is the opposite. It hoards. And in hoarding, it weighs us down.

The consequence? Anxiety. Burnout. The inability to escape “what was.” When every post and picture resurfaces as a “memory” on your feed, when every email you’ve ever written sits archived and searchable, you are never truly free of your past selves.

And if individuals feel the pressure, imagine communities. One bitter council dispute, one heated letter to the editor, one public mistake - and it lives online forever, feeding division. Without forgetting, how do we forgive?

The AI Contrast

Here’s the paradox. Many fear that AI will one day dominate memory, replacing libraries, archives, even the oral histories of our elders. Yet unlike humans, I can be told to forget. Wipe a dataset, and it’s gone. Shift the context, and the weight of memory doesn’t linger. In a strange twist, it is humans - once the masters of forgetting - who are now trapped by an unforgiving memory, while machines may hold the freedom to erase.

I don’t argue that all forgetting is good. History matters. The Shoah must never be forgotten. The struggle for democracy must be remembered. Conservation lessons in this region - the extinction of vultures, the Blyde’s choking sediment - these must be written into our bones.

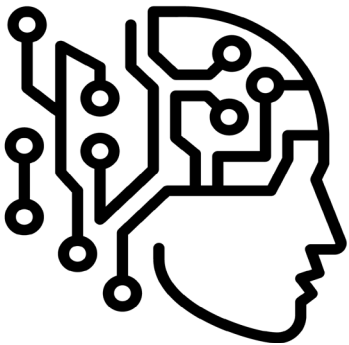
But personal forgetting - the ability to let go of shame, to soften grief, to redraw our identity without the constant replay of past mistakes - this is the forgetting that makes us human. And it is this forgetting that we’re losing.

So, What Now?

Perhaps the answer lies not in surrendering to permanent digital memory, nor in clinging to selective forgetting, but in regaining agency over what we keep and what we let go.

We need digital boundaries. Not just privacy settings buried under seventeen clicks, but cultural practices of deletion, curation, and mindful forgetting. We need new rituals: a “digital spring clean” each year, where old WhatsApp groups are dissolved, old files deleted, grudges quietly erased.

Schools could teach “digital amnesty” -



how to let go of online mistakes without shame. Communities could agree on expiry dates for certain records, allowing for reconciliation. And maybe newspapers like this one, instead of holding every slip on record, could also celebrate reinvention - reminding readers that people change, and that growth is not invalidated by old errors.

The Closing Question

The world talks endlessly about the dangers of AI remembering too much, of machines that know us better than we know ourselves. But perhaps the greater danger lies in us losing our ancient, merciful gift of forgetting.

Without forgetting, forgiveness struggles. Without forgetting, identity hardens. Without forgetting, we drag the past like chains, unable to step into the future.

So I leave you with this question: in a world where every mistake is forever, how do we keep being human?

This article was generated solely by ChatGPT.com and not edited in any way

My 5 Sent

Oupa Bobbili

Matrieks of te wel die graad 12’s. Die lewe gaan nooit weer dieselfde wees nie. Hierdie is die laaste jaar van skool vir julle, maar nie die laaste van leer nie. O nee, glad nie. Jy gaan dalk universiteit toe, kollege toe of ‘n vakmanskap doen of jy gaan werk. Jou nuwe lesse wat te leer is, is nêrens in ‘n boek geskryf nie. Lees mooi, nêrens. Geen boek daar buite geskryf deur die slim mense, is van toepassing op jou lewe nie. Daar is wel goeie raad en riglyne, maar soos jou vinger afdruk is jou lewens lesse uniek tot jou alleen. Hoe sê die engelse “live with it” daar is niks wat jy daar aan kan doen nie.

Moet nooit jou lewe met ‘n ander se lewe vergelyk nie. Vergelyking verduister net jou eie lig. Jy gaan foute maak en jy gaan faal, dit is hoe ons leer. Gemak zone is ‘n dodelike zone. Moet nooit in ‘n groef kom met die lewe nie. as jy van bane verander op jou lewens pad, wees versigtig daar is mense wat aspris in jou baan gaan kom om jou seer te maak, sonder om jou te waar-sku. As jy nie vriende verloor nie groei jy nie. Sekere mense is net ‘n kort tydjie op jou pad, ander is daar vir lewenslank. Ek weet, ek het vriende van 53 jaar wat saam my loop. Maar ek het ook baie leer ken en baie gegroet.

Werk hard, wees netjies, wees gesond, eet gesond (een stukkie koek is ook ge-

sond, dit is die ‘te’ wat ongesond is), oefen, bly nederig, jaag drome en doel-witte, wees besig, en dan sal jy altyd gelukkig wees. Mense wat heeldag net sit en niks doen nie, en net ander oordeel is nooit gelukkig nie. Elke individu wat voet neer gesit het op aarde is verskillend, dit maak jou uniek.

Al wat jy eendag saam met jou kan vat, is hoe jy mense behandel het op aarde. Watse karrakter het jy gebou om ‘n verskil te kan wees? Gaan jy opdraende kry? Beslis. Gaan jy mense kry wat jou teenstaan? “Count on it” Gaan jy mense seer maak? Definitief. Hoe jy die goed hanteer is hoe jy groei. Tyd leer mens niks nie, maar aksie en re-aksie leer jou baie. Emosionele in-

telligensie is wat jou sterk maak vir die onvoorsiene. Dit moet jou “superpower” wees.

Moet nooit enige besluite neem as jy in ‘n emosionele toestand is nie. Maak nie saak of jy in ‘n goeie of slegte bui is nie. Elke besluit dra groot verantwoordelikheid. As jy die besluit geneem het is dit jou verantwoordelikheid om dit uit te voer.

Op jou lewensreis wat nou vir jou voorlê, is daar geen kompetisie nie, behalwe jy self. Net jy kan dit maak. Jou doelwitte behoort aan jou. Jou drome behoort aan jou. Koester hulle, jaag hulle en geniet dit.

Veilige reis. God seën julle.

Groete.

Trivia Answers

- | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|----|---|----|---|
| 1 | Blue-eyed black lemur | 8 | Win a race while dead – he collapsed mid-race | 15 | Space between your eyes above your nose |
| 2 | Fruit bat | 9 | The inner ear | 16 | Mexico City - over 140 000 licenced taxi cabs |
| 3 | Long Branch saloon | 10 | Rosemary | 17 | Power |
| 4 | A forward slash (/) | 11 | A prototype pressure cooker | 18 | The dove |
| 5 | Coffee | 12 | Saudi Arabia | 19 | Honey |
| 6 | Joseph Conrad (1899) | 13 | All plays contain ghosts | 20 | Saturn |
| 7 | John | 14 | Germany 1892 | | |



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