

# Botfriends newsletter

## October 2019



Botfriends has been criticised lately for giving credence to the exclusivity surrounding the entrance to Meerensee and surrounds because Botfriends is providing bird cards to birders who wish to take advantage of the surrounds. This is an historical matter, the precedent having been established by previous committees. It brings in a very small income at R25 per card, so we're not exactly making a fortune from this, considering the small number issued. What it *is* doing is furthering an appreciation of nature in those who go there - and anyone who becomes a member of Botfriends may apply for a card.

Another related issue is that of the Sonesta Gate which cuts off access to non-residents. Botfriends would like to make it clear that cutting of access to the area is not acceptable. We have intervened with powers who be to remedy this issue and have been told that it's illegal. In the meantime, we are happy to talk to anyone about the problem.

We call on all those who criticise from without rather to become *involved* in one of the organisations which work every day to make Ward 8 a more viable, vibrant and forward-thinking place to live in. We're all trying our best - for free - so step up and be counted!

There are also those (with possibly vested interests) who have complained about the Alien Clearing signs we have put up in the area, kindly donated by Remax, at no cost to us, to show how proud we are that we are making progress in conquering the invasives - shame on you - concern yourselves with controlling climate change and alien species instead, and with popularising what we do. Ed.

### Fisherhaven Tortoises

Of the 26 kinds of tortoises in South Africa, four of them are present here in Fisherhaven: the large Leopard or Mountain tortoise is introduced and adults kept as pets result in the occasional small hatchling wandering the streets. The Water Turtle is an occasional visitor, probably from down the Afdaks stream course. The Angulate (Bowsprit, Ploegskaar or Rooipens - because of the projecting under-chin shield, or the red-colouring of the shell underside) is common and so is the smaller Parrotbeak or Padloper. The Padloper has a greenish shell, and unlike the triangular edge scales of the Angulate, the scales are squarish. It is also a smaller tortoise, growing to about 9cm long. The angulate reaches 19cm. Hatchlings of the Padloper are about 2.5cm long and the Angulate a little larger at above 3cm.

We have been monitoring tortoises in the village since 2015, photographing the underside that serves as a kind of fingerprint record. So far we have documented 812 tortoises in the village in 8 areas (delimited by roads and residential plots). The Angulates are more common and outnumber the Padloper by about 3:1. The Angulates prefer sandier areas but are not confined there by any means, while similarly the Padlopers prefer a harder soil surface. The former occur only in the western area of South Africa and Southern Namibia and the Padloper in the southern parts of the South Africa.

Angulates lay up to 6 eggs a year, deposited singly in holes dug in the ground, while the Padloper lays one clutch on 2-3 eggs. Egg-laying is during spring and early summer and hatching is generally stimulated by autumn rain. The incubation period may vary from a few months to six or more.

Both species are active throughout the year, except when it is really cold and wet, or excessively hot in the summer. They thus avoid overheating in the summer, while in winter they come out to bask and gain body heat. The Angulates only mature at about 12 years of age, growing at about 1cm p a to an average maximum of about 14.5cm for the females and 17.5cm for the males. The Padlopers mature a little faster and mature at 6-7 years but the males only reach about 6.5cm and the females 8cm. Both species are fairly long-lived and can reach beyond 30 years of age. They are territorial to a degree but not much seems to be known about the ranges for the Padlopers. Angulate males cover about 1.5ha and the females a bit more. Individual tortoises are very sensitive to their habitat and "know" their area in great detail, imprinted on them from first hatching. It is very stressful for them to be moved, even when simply picking them up off the road and moving them to where one might suppose they are heading.



But this is something also not really well understood and we are experiencing some problems in really understanding the movements of these animals. Generally they do not seem to move readily between the areas we define by roads and plots e.g. Seaway and Miramar tortoises have not been observed along

Riverside or the eastern part of the village. Neither have we recorded any movement of note from the northern to the southern sides.

What does puzzle us is that many of the older tortoises seem to have disappeared and we seldom see them a second time. This may be due to human predation; on the other hand there are a few individuals that we have recorded many times. We really intended our interest to be a joyful and pleasurable exercise in learning to recognise and



know the animals individually. It has not turned out that way. We are just not seeing the same tortoises often enough. There are two vacant plots on Broadway (numbers 73 and 75). We have seen 140 tortoises there since 2015, mostly adults. They can

move through to Erf 71 and also to plots on the Protea Rd side. A few have moved down to Riverside, but we cannot account for the majority of the animals including two ancient large males that we saw a few times early on. Despite our many visits we now seldom see more than two or three tortoises and it is difficult to believe that it is simply their shy and hidden habits or even random movement to adjacent properties that account for their disappearance. The same applies to the Crescent area, Seaway Corner and the Riverside areas. After the big fires in the OSM area in 2018, there was a sudden number of apparently new arrivals and we suspect that someone had collected animals that survived the fires and then released them here in Fisherhaven. There is also a possibility that someone in Sandbaai, worried about an excess of tortoises on his property there, thought that a new home could be found for them here. So the few repeat sightings and new sightings of even older animals, suggest that a project like this will need to run for at least ten years before any meaningful information is obtained.

These tortoises are something that we should value and cherish. Unfortunately environmental interest and concern is not a feature of the Ward 8 and Fisherhaven culture. The biggest challenge Botfriends faces is taking for granted the extraordinary blessing that the area is endowed with: not just a big expanse of water, but open green space where nature is available to be valued and cared for.

**Bruce Bayer**

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This is what we have spent your very welcome money on for the alien clearing challenge so far:

Income:	R10 050
Expenditure:	
Labour	R 7 220
Fuel (transporting labourers)	R 600
Balance not yet spent:	R 2 230*
*[Balance being spent on follow-up clearing]	
Amount needed to continue with China Marais clearing:	R 4 000

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**Are you going to take up the challenge? The more that is contributed, the cleaner and safer our surroundings will be. Our bank details: Friends of the Bot River Estuary and Environs Standard Bank 185565549 Branch 050312. PLEASE use your name and address as reference. Cash payments: Contact [botvlei@gmail.com](mailto:botvlei@gmail.com).**

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**LOOKING FOR NEW MEMBERS**



**WHO WANT TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO OUR ENVIRONMENT ... and a tour**

**If you are interested in joining Botfriends or know someone who might be interested, do contact our membership exec person, Wendy Mc Faul, at [botvlei@gmail.com](mailto:botvlei@gmail.com). We'd love more involvement in our projects. Wendy is also interested in our organising small picnic tours around the area - doing a similar tour to the one the exec did earlier this year: taking people to Paddavlei and other important environmental sites around Ward 8 and concluding at the beach with a glass of wine and a few snacks? A wine sponsor would help too! Do get in touch with Wendy if you're interested.**

Editor: [Renee Austin](#)