

**Moepel Conservancy is an ambitious project and will be a game-changer when it comes to fruition.**



I'm sure that the members of this conservancy will need no reminding of what a special place the Waterberg is – from its tapestry of hills and valleys, its kranzes and kloofs and the vistas across landscapes that show scant evidence of man, to the interesting rock formations and the botanical riches and a fauna of all shapes and sizes. The region's proclamation as an internationally recognised Biosphere Reserve was well founded, and more recently BirdLife International have accorded it another recognition as an “Important Bird & Biodiversity Area”, an IBA in shorthand.

It is under the IBA umbrella that we set out a year ago to undertake an open-ended assessment of the Waterberg's biodiversity. We are retired, and so we have time, and have focussed initially in the two areas where we have expertise – birds and dragonflies. We continue recording and mapping these across the Waterberg, but, with the help of others, have also expanded into the botanical side, into reptiles, butterflies and moths, and the smaller mammals. In time, and as opportunity or the skills needed present themselves, we'll expand ever more widely into the fauna of the region.

Take the birds as an example. Although the average Waterberg farm typically supports 200-250 species of birds, we have records to show that the current bird tally for the Waterberg is 447, an exceptional number by any standard. A number of these are red-listed and it is these threatened or endangered species that we are striving to get quantitative information on – how many pairs of Martial Eagles, Secretary birds or Black Storks, for example, does the Waterberg support and where are they? There are 242 butterfly species currently recorded here and a couple of these too are endangered, their entire populations restricted to single tiny areas. Are there more, and if so where do they occur? For moths, our list is slowly climbing, now well over 200 species and for lizards, ideally equipped for the Waterberg's rocky terrain, the species list currently stands at 40. Six of them are found here and nowhere else, their names telling you just how localised they are - Waterberg Flat Gecko, Waterberg Dwarf Gecko, Waterberg Flat Lizard, Waterberg Girdled Lizard .... The Waterberg's streams, seeps, vleis and rivers support a rich dragonfly fauna too, now at 92 species, and this area is the South African stronghold for several of these. Are the wetlands that support populations of these special species safeguarded?

Botanically, the Waterberg supports an impressive wealth too. The tree list stands at 274 species and a number of these are endemic, the Waterberg Cycad, Waterberg Raisin, and Waterberg Mountain Medlar for example. Wild flowers are another area we're attempting to get a handle on and thanks to big inputs from a number of residents with an interest in them we have information on about 400 species. Some of their names tell one where they are from: Waterberg Bellbush, Waterberg hibiscus, Waterberg Agapanthus. Again, we'd like to know that these populations are in safe hands.

We have a website that shows what we are doing – <http://www.waterberg-bioquest.co.za>– and it is steadily growing as information comes in. It provides checklists of the fauna and flora mentioned above and an ever-growing collection of photographs (a couple of thousand in at the moment) of what each species looks like. It is open-source and accessible to anyone. It's one objective is to put on record the region's natural history and highlight what species or sites have special importance. Another is to provide a resource that landowners, visitors or students can tap into to find the name for some or other flower they might find in the veld. And, thirdly, it hopes to contribute to inspiring the various custodians of the region's faunal and floral wealth to become more aware of the magic that awaits them by getting to know about all the things that live alongside them here in the Waterberg.

Please contact us if you have questions or photos or information to share.

Warwick & Michèle Tarboton