

Stepping out

Various units of the South African National Defense Force have been visiting Koeberg this year as part of their ongoing involvement with National Key Points.

In February 2019 over 100 members from the SA War College in Pretoria visited and in April 2019 ten members from the Western Cape SANDF Silvermine visited. Silvermine is the Joint Tactical Headquarters and is responsible for all SANDF resources in the Western Cape. The SANDF is involved with Koeberg as part of the Emergency Planning Committee.

During May another large group of over 100 members of the Special Forces Unit, based in Langebaan, visited.

During these visits the focus was on potential risks, cooperation and contingencies.

Over 100 members of the Special Forces Unit spilling out from the Visitors Centre



Oxpecker causes a 'twitch'*

Koeberg Nature Reserve has been hosting an unusual visitor for the last two months - a solitary Red-billed Oxpecker (Rooibekrenostervoël). Oxpeckers are not supposed to be found this far south - their usual distribution is in the north-eastern part of South Africa, in grassland and bushveld regions.

The appearance of the bird has caused a bit of a stir amongst bird watchers and conservation staff, as it is the first of this species recorded in Koeberg Nature Reserve.

Oxpeckers are highly specialised - they feed almost exclusively on ticks, other ecto-parasites and blood. They are specifically adapted to spend many hours perched on mammals. These adaptations include short legs, strong feet with sharp, curved claws and flattened bills for scissoring through hair.

Red-billed Oxpeckers are regarded as a *near-threatened* species. Both oxpecker species (red and yellow-billed populations) were decimated in the mid-20th century due to arsenic-based cattle dips used by farmers to control ticks on livestock.

Birding experts believe this solitary bird is probably lost. Nevertheless, it has made itself very comfortable on Koeberg's eland, zebra and springbok.

*'Twitching' is a British term used to describe the pursuit of a previously located rare bird.



The visiting Red-billed Oxpecker patrolling for ticks on a zebra



Get to know your snakes

Boomslang (*Dispholidus typus*)

The name 'Boomslang' is Afrikaans for tree snake, but *Boomslang* has been adopted as the official name in English.

A *Boomslang* is a slender snake with large eyes on a large blunt head that is distinct from the neck. The snake can grow up to two meters in length.

Males have a variety of colours, from solid, bright green to rust-red, or a combination of black and yellow. Females have a dull olive-brown or grey colour. Juveniles are quite spectacular with bright emerald eyes, white throats and cryptic, twig-coloured bodies.

They are usually found in trees and shrubs, hence the name *Boomslang*. When prey is detected, the snake will freeze, move its head from side-to-side, mimicking leaves moving in the wind, and then it swiftly attacks. The snake is equipped with backfangs that inject venom used for killing prey and in self-defense.

The *Boomslang's* venom is haemotoxic, which means that it affects the blood-clotting function of the victim, causing internal and external bleeding. Any bite from a *Boomslang* is life-threatening and needs urgent medical care.

Look out for:

- Huge eyes and short stubby head
- May inflate the neck and most of the body when provoked
- Active during the day
- Likely to be spotted in trees and shrubs



Collecting data

The Satin Squill or Brandui (*Drimia elata*) is found all over South Africa, yet very little data has been collected about the species. Currently it is thought that they all belong to the same species.

The Custodians for Rare and Endangered Wildflowers (CREW) are studying the plant and Koeberg conservation staff are assisting by doing geo-tagging. This will make it easier for CREW staff to collect samples when the plants are not flowering and thus not easy to find.

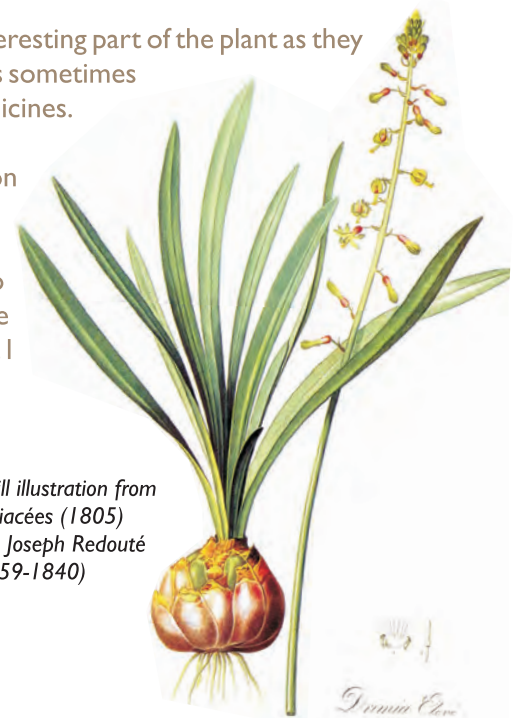


They flower from September to January. The flowers are white to purple-brown and can grow up to one metre tall. The plant's leaves only appear after flowering.

The typically large bulb of the Satin Squill

The bulb is the most interesting part of the plant as they can grow very large. It is sometimes used in traditional medicines.

Koeberg conservation staff are recording location data for this species to assist with future taxonomical studies.



Satin Squill illustration from *Les Liliacées* (1805) by Pierre Joseph Redouté (1759-1840)