**JAEI ENVIRONMENTAL CORNER**

****

***This is a sharing of an article which appeared in the Financial Times, 2 July 2016***

**Joburg's wise residents: Owls - We do give a hoot!**

***By Luke Alfred***

Urban mythology has it that wild animals should stay where they belong – in game parks, conservancies, reserves. They are even at a comfortable arm’s length — or so the argument goes — on large, game-carrying farms, accessible enough to the binocular’s eyes but not so close as to inspire fear or discomfort.

The contemporary landscape is, however, very different — urban mythology is one thing, reality is quite another. Animals — small predators, raptors, hyenas, baboons — are edging into the very heart of suburbia. Whether you have a large spread in Kyalami, or a chichi sculptured garden in Parkhurst, chances are that you’ve sighted a pair of peregrine falcons; perhaps you’ve even been lucky enough to spot genet spoor or have Facebooked photographs of hornbills to friends and followers.

If you live close to Roodepoort Ridge your local Facebook page might be full of brown hyena sightings; if you live close to vacant land or the veld your rubbish bin could have been tipped over by a baboon. The great river of urban life flows busily with tales of sightings, land-grabs, fresh nests and shifting territories. Townships are no exception.

“There are more barn owls, the most common species of owl worldwide, in Alexandra than there are in all of Sandton,” says Jonathan Haw of EcoSolutions, a company which specialises in finding solutions to ecologically sensitive issues in cities.

No bird highlights the city’s restless boundaries better than the owl. “Rodent populations have exploded because, basically, earlier this year [at the time of the strike] Pikitup didn’t pick it up,” says Haw with a flourish. Owls have homed in on the rodent explosion, feeding and feasting, demonstrating that the relationship between animals “out there” in the countryside and the “in here” of cities is not immutable, but effortlessly dynamic.

“If you grew up in Johannesburg when I did you might remember that we were told as children that syringa berries are poisonous and we should never eat them,” he says. “The loeries who advanced on the city ate the berries with no apparent ill-effects. The animal life of the city is a rapidly changing dynamic.”

Owls not only keep the rising rodent population in check but the female owl’s egg-laying capacity is in direct proportion to her fat reserves — an indication of how regularly she has eaten. Simply put, the bigger her fat reserves, the larger her brood. Female barn owls, for example, can lay 10 or 12 eggs. Indeed, mating might be taking place in a tree (or on the ground somewhere quiet) near you at this very moment, with the winter solstice acting as the trigger for generalised owl friskiness. After gestation and hatching, it is a mere 35 days before baby owls start hunting. “I estimate that between 50% and 60% of barn owls die before they are one-year-old,” says Haw. “Without doubt the main cause of owl mortality is starvation. They’re simply not able to feed themselves sufficiently.”

While urban owls have swooped down on the spiking rodent population, the rats themselves are getting smarter, an example of their savvy being what Haw refers to as “bait shyness”. He says they’ve got to the stage where they are “bait-box shy” and tend to steer clear of the poisons and “rodenticides” which the managers of industrial parks and townhouse complexes put out for them on a weekly or monthly basis. Owl — and small raptor — death from eating poisoned rats is difficult to quantify but owls can also be hit when they are frozen in the headlights of cars and trucks. The main cause of infant owl mortality nevertheless remains death by starvation.

The saga of owls in contemporary Johannesburg was given real domestic substance six weeks ago as autumn began to segue into winter. My family and I live in an old, north-facing Kensington farmhouse with an unusually large, tree-heavy garden. We have knobbly pear trees, old walnuts, a grumpy stunted oak, a magnificent palm and an even bigger magnolia, its glossy green leaves polished daily by the sun.

The jacaranda, however, is probably the finest tree in the garden, and it was from here one weekday mid-morning that I heard a terrible ruckus, teetering on the verge of hysteria. Curious, I walked from my cellar study around the corner of the house to examine the noise. The loeries were going bananas, with the mossies’ shrill cries not far behind, but peer as I might, I couldn’t see what was troubling them. Twenty minutes later, with the noise continuing at an almost constant pitch of high anxiety, I returned. This time, high in the upper reaches of the jacaranda, was a spotted eagle owl, yellow eyes intent, two tuft-like “horns” giving her round, flat face an even more intriguing aspect.

I alerted my dispersed family (two elder sons studying in Cape Town) and back came the rather sniffy reply that until photographic evidence was presented, my tale was a fiction. I grabbed my cellphone, crept up to the tree and took a not-very-good photograph, the owl barely discernible in the top of the frame, silhouetted against the sky.

Much excitement followed. Far better photos were taken and j-pegged around the world. Visitors and friends were given free — if slightly breathless — guided tours. It was like having a baby in the house. Everyone seemed to whisper and walk on tip-toes. My wife and I would meet on the stoep, both sneaking a mid-afternoon glimpse of this magnificent creature. We talked about little else for days.

We even alerted our street security group and while they confirmed further owl sightings in the area, we seemed to be largely alone in our wonder. A second owl might have taken up temporary residence in the tree — we weren’t quite sure. In the first flush of awe we had an owl box hammered to one of the jacaranda’s upper branches. We hoped the family would grow.

Then, as quickly and silently as the owl had arrived, she disappeared. There was no evidence of her at all, until we spotted several strange deposits around our braai area at the base of the jacaranda. Investigation revealed that what we were seeing were owl pellets, regurgitated food replete with rodent jaws, claws and rib bones. Such bones are often sharp and can’t be easily digested, posing a threat to the owl’s digestive tract, so the pellets, a mixture of rat and mouse fur, as well as assorted bones, are compacted into a pellet and heaved up. The owl (she’s an adult, as confirmed by the horned tufts) had clearly been around, though we hadn’t spotted her for days.

After a lapse of a couple of weeks, we spied her again, expertly camouflaged in the upper reaches of the magnolia. A pattern has emerged. After first light on weekend mornings my wife and I are woken by howls of distress in the jacaranda. Peering sleepily through our bedroom-window curtains, we spot the owl. She spends weekends, sometimes continuing through to a long-weekend Monday, leaving the comfort of either the jacaranda or magnolia each day as the sun sets and the temperature falls. She seems to have somewhere else to go on weekdays but now, two weeks running, she’s squatted in the magnolia on weekends. We’re hoping she finds a mate and that they eventually put the box to good use. My wife and I are rather hoping for a family — and for more breathless wonder we both struggle to express.

***(With Special acknowledgements to Ecosolutions*** [***http://ecosolutions.co.za/***](http://ecosolutions.co.za/)

