

Groototters at Wildcliff

At Wildcliff, a Nature Reserve in the Langeberg Mountains, we endeavour to discover the life around us by inviting researchers from South Africa and abroad to conduct surveys of the local animal and plants. Two surveys of small mammals have allowed us to discover the presence of several animals that we knew about but had not previously seen. To find them, researchers from America set out specialized traps to capture, photograph and release the creatures. Pictures of Wildcliff mammals can be seen on the Web at <http://picasaweb.google.com/wildcliff/WildcliffMammals>

Some small mammals at Wildcliff include: the Greater Musk Shrew (*Crocidura flavescens*), Reddish-Grey Musk Shrew (*Crocidura cyanea*), Forest Shrew or Zuurbron Forest Shrew (*Myosorex varius* or *Myosorex tenuis*), Vlei Rat (*Otomys irroratus*), Striped Mouse (*Rhabdomys pumilio*), Cape Spiny Mouse (*Acomys subspinosus*), Verreaux's Mouse (*Mastomys verreauxii*), Pygmy Mouse (*Mus minutoides*), Large Spotted Genet (*Genetta tigrina*), Small Spotted Genet (*Genetta genetta*), and Small Grey Mongoose (*Galerella pulverulenta*).

Wildcliff is a private Nature Reserve, founded in 2007 by Ian and Jenny Giddy. It lies northeast of Heidelberg off the Gysmanshoek road. This is the third article in a series about what goes on at Wildcliff.

The reserve has a research programme, where volunteers study invasive species and restoration ecology, as well as the mountain flora and fauna, such as birds, snakes, frogs, insects, baboons and other mammals. (See www.wildcliff.org/research.)

A team of two Wildcliff researchers – Steve McGlynn from South Africa and Sarah Bee from Wales – have seen Water Mongoose

and found definite evidence of the Cape Clawless Otter, *Aonyx Capensis*.

Cape Clawless Otters are large otters (hence the name **Groototter**) – around 1.3 meters in length and typically weighing around 12-18 Kg with males being around 2 Kg heavier than females. They have broad heads with muscular necks. Their fur is thick and can vary in colour from a dark chocolate brown to a pale tan, with the chest, chin and cheeks being white or slightly off-white. Their paws have un-webbed fingers and toes.

One of the common signs that indicate a Cape Clawless Otter lives in an area is the presence of latrine sites where multiple dung deposits can be seen full of crushed crab shells.

Steve and Sarah have found prints and dung of these otters near the Plattekloof River, on the eastern boundary of Wildcliff. Although otters are generally water animals, the Cape Clawless Otter spends a considerable amount of time out of the water and often wanders several kilometers away from the water - particularly when searching for a new habitat. This can leave juveniles vulnerable to their chief predators of this area, namely snakes and eagles.



Cape Clawless Otter, or Groototter

Groototters are playful and agile, and are excellent swimmers. They may be seen sliding down mud banks into the water! These otters eat fish, freshwater crabs, frogs, reptiles, and the eggs of ground nesting birds. Where farmers keep free range domestic ducks then the otters can become a problem as the ducks are likely to

fall prey to the otter. Wildcliff rivers have crabs, but as they are scarce, it's likely that the otters have a more varied diet.

The Cape Clawless Otter searches by sight for prey in clear water, but in the tannin-stained water of the Langeberg it can also use its fingers to feel in the mud to search for prey. The fingers are very dexterous and sensitive, and like humans, they can be left or right handed!



Sarah Bee (with Steve McGlynn in the background)

Future articles will describe the cute little Vlei Rat and some of the other funny creatures of our area. What other subjects would you like to read about? You can reach us at 028 722 2633 or ian@wildcliff.org.

About the writer

Dr. Ian Giddy is a professor at New York University. He and his wife, Jenny, are former South Africans who spend as much time as they can in this area. They are ardent conservationists and have founded two nature reserves – one is Wildcliff, and the other is Cloudbridge, in the mountains of Costa Rica.