

Wildcliff and the Dwarf Chameleon

Wildcliff is a private Nature Reserve in the Langeberg Mountains, founded in 2007 by Dr. Ian Giddy and his wife Jenny. It lies northeast of Heidelberg off the Gysmanshoek road., This is the second article about the activities at Wildcliff. More will follow.

The reserve has an active research programme, with researchers coming from Europe, Canada, USA and Australia as well as South Africa. They stay for a few weeks to many months, and study restoration ecology, invasives, and the indigenous flora and the fauna, including birds, snakes, frogs, insects, baboons and other mammals.

One ongoing project is our search for **chameleons**. There are fifteen recognised species of South African dwarf chameleons (*Bradypodion*, meaning slow-footed), found only in South Africa. Five of these are endemic (found only here) to the Cape Fold Mountains, which includes the Langeberg range. Unfortunately, the geographic distribution of many of these species remains largely unknown, and their diversity and relationships remain poorly understood by scientists.

A leading researcher on dwarf chameleons, Dr Krystal Tolley of the South African National Biodiversity Institute in Kirstenbosch, has invited Wildcliff to participate in a study of the dispersion and genetic heritage of these fascinating creatures. So far we have found only one chameleon – it is the Robertson Dwarf Chameleon, *Bradypodion gutturale*. Unlike most others, the Robertson is adapted to mountain fynbos, which covers most of Wildcliff. Photos of it can be seen on the Web at <http://picasaweb.google.com/wildcliff/WildcliffChameleons>.

Who can fail to be fascinated by these prehistoric-looking reptiles? Does the charm of a chameleon come from their amazing long tongues, their protruding eyes that can turn independently in all directions, their prehensile tail that they curl up behind them when at rest or their slow, calculated movements across a branch? For us, it's their amazing patterns and colours and odd knobby heads.

The Dwarf Chameleon is an excellent hunter, feeding primarily on small insects. Most chameleons live primarily in trees, bushes and on other plants. The Robertson, also known as the Little Karoo Dwarf chameleon, is most commonly found on Ericas or other fynbos plants. Observing one of these chameleons in the wild is quite difficult, as they remain still or move slowly and their colourings change to blend in with the surroundings. Researchers say that it is best to look for chameleons at night. They are active by day, but at night, they can be found by torchlight as they sleep, clinging to a spindly branch. When something touches it, the chameleon may drop to the ground in a reflex movement designed as a safety measure to avoid nocturnal predators.

We would welcome help from anyone in the area who spots a chameleon. Read about them in Dr. Tolley's book, *Chameleons of Southern Africa*. Note the location and date & time, and take good photos, but *do not* move the chameleon – they are very sensitive creatures who can easily go into shock and get sick if moved. Phone us at 028 722 2633 or email Ian at ian@wildcliff.org.

Note to editor: if you wish to include a photo, attached is a good one. You can also download it from:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/wildcliff/WildcliffChameleons#5297937781781970114>

