

a lasting impression

SAMARA PRIVATE GAME RESERVE

Learning nature's sign language

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **JOHN YELD**

IT'S LATE FEBRUARY and still swelteringly hot in the Great Karoo. Most of the ephemeral pools and puddles left by recent thunderstorms have already dried and the mud has started to crack. Physically etched into the dusty earth fabric of this semi-arid region are scores of stories – real-life stories of what the local birds, animals, insects and reptiles have been doing and of how they have interacted with or tried to avoid each other. You just have to be able to read the language in which these particular stories are written.

above *The beautiful Great Karoo landscape at Samara Private Nature Reserve near Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape.*

opposite *The tracks of a Cape Turtle Dove etched in the Karoo mud.*

THE LANGUAGE is, of course, called tracking, and its 'alphabet' consists of myriad signs and symbols in the form of tracks, spoor, prints, impressions, scratches, excavations, burrowings, bulges, incisions and protrusions left by paw, pad, hoof, claw, tail, tooth, skin or feather. The other 'grapheme of the veld', and probably the easiest to read, is dung, ranging in shape and size from small heaps of neatly pointed droppings to big messy piles.

For most urban dwellers, this language of the veld is mysterious

and largely unintelligible. But for Karel Benadie, more popularly known as 'Oom Pokkie' and one of fewer than 10 formally certified master trackers in South Africa, interpreting these tracks is as easy and informative as reading his local knock-and-drop newspaper.

Recently, BirdLife South Africa was privileged to watch Oom (Uncle) Pokkie demonstrate his astonishing tracking skills while training students on part of the 27 000-hectare Samara Private Game Reserve near Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. Here, at one point >





Master tracker Karel 'Oom Pokkie' Benadie leads tracker students Weaven Fourie, Sakhile Sibiyana and Jerry Sibiyana on a field exercise at Samara.

during a field exercise, he pointed out to his students marks etched into the dried mud on a gravel track. To the uninitiated, it was just a dry, dusty mess. But he read it very differently, immediately seeing the foot imprints that allowed him both to identify the subject as a Kori Bustard and to understand the context of the bird using this spot while it was still full of rainwater.

'So maybe it was sitting in the water for a while to get cool, making

its tummy feathers a bit wet. Look, you can clearly see the mark its one leg made here!' he says, pointing to a nondescript line in the dried mud. And as he explains the mess in the mud is miraculously transformed into a mental image of the world's heaviest flying bird, razor-sharp beak agape in the sweltering heat and droplets of muddy water cascading off its creamy belly feathers as it tried to cool off in the now evaporated Karoo puddle.

Oom Pokkie is teaching the students the art of tracking at the aptly named Tracker Academy, a training division of the South African College of Tourism in Graaff-Reinet that operates under the auspices of the Peace Parks Foundation. Co-founder and manager Alex van den Heever explains that the academy trains unemployed rural people in the traditional skills of animal tracking for employment in the ecotourism industry. Particularly

during the past half century or so, ancient tracking skills – 'an indigenous art form that evolved for reasons of human survival' – have disappeared at an alarming rate in southern Africa and the academy is seeking to reverse that trend. 'Our over-arching vision is to restore indigenous knowledge in Africa and our aim is to empower tracker graduates to become ambassadors for the growing African wildlife industry by bringing authenticity and accuracy to environmental education, wildlife protection, ecotourism, monitoring and research,' says Alex.

The academy is the first and as yet only specialist tracker training school to achieve formal accreditation in South Africa. Its training programme is accredited by the Culture, Arts, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority and its Tracker and Lead Tracker certificates are endorsed by the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa.



Alex also points out that the academy has a long-standing relationship with BirdLife South Africa.

The academy started operations at Samara in January 2010, with Oom Pokkie as principal trainer. His wife of 17 years, Janetta Bock-Benadie, was initially a camp attendant, but she quickly obtained her own accreditation as a tracker and assessor and is now responsible for the facilitation and assessment of all the theory components of the academy's skills programme.

Annually, 16 students in two groups of eight are chosen from between 150 and 250 applicants. Four of the current intake are from Mpumalanga, three are from KwaZulu-Natal and one is from Middelburg in the Great Karoo. Previously there have been students from Namibia, Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana. After a six-month semester at Samara in the arid Great Karoo, meeting place of four of South Africa's eight biomes, the students move to Londolozi in the bushveld biome for a second semester. 'By doing that, we're giving them a learning experience in two very different environments,' says Janetta.

Alex tells me that some 15 to 20 per cent of the course is devoted to birds and birding. 'The students do a lot more birding at Londolozi, as one of the trainers there, Renias Mhlongo, is a very enthusiastic and skilful birder.'

ANCIENT TRACKING SKILLS ... HAVE DISAPPEARED AT AN ALARMING RATE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AND THE ACADEMY IS SEEKING TO REVERSE THAT TREND

Other than those who spent time herding cattle as young boys, few of the students entering the Tracker Academy had a reasonable birthing knowledge before starting the year-long course, according to Alex. However, they all emerge as competent birders thanks to the efforts of a number of specialists.

Such specialists have included BirdLife South Africa's Special Projects Programme Manager Martin Taylor, who was responsible for outreach programmes where several of the tracker students were trained. Taylor, lead editor of the 2015 *Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*, is currently responsible for the compilation of the 2016 State of South Africa's Birds Report.

Exceptional birder, trainer and conservationist Joe Grosel conducts two week-long bird courses for the students. Joe, who is also chairman of BirdLife Polokwane, has trained the students at the

Academy's Londolozi field campus for the past four years and from 2016 he'll be conducting courses at both Londolozi and Samara.

Professor Derek Engelbrecht of the Department of Biodiversity at the University of Limpopo usually accompanies Joe on his training visits to Londolozi. In addition, the academy has started a project in association with Derek that involves recording bird alarm calls in response to different predators.

'Renias Mhlongo at Londolozi is very skilful at interpreting bird alarm calls,' explains Alex. 'We want to measure his knowledge as well as record the calls for a library I'm creating. So, with the aim of understanding bird "language" better, Tracker Academy has joined forces with Professor Engelbrecht to formally document bird alarm calls. As far as I'm aware, this is the first project of its type.'

clockwise, from top left *The lovely heart-shaped track of the majestic kudu; a tracker student points to the delicate paw prints of a striped polecat; tracks made by a Kori Bustard in the drying Karoo mud; the neat pile of droppings left by a kudu.*

AS NATURE INTENDED

Award-winning Samara Private Game Reserve is a top-end nature-tourism destination, created over the past dozen years through the purchase of 11 former sheep farms totalling 27 000 hectares. The dream of owners Sarah and Mark Tompkins – to combine enough land to restore a self-sustaining ecosystem in this beautiful semi-arid landscape, including all naturally occurring prey and predators – is close to reality.

Manager of the Tracker Academy Alex van den Heever praises the couple for their 'pioneering effort'. 'What were bankrupt sheep farms operating against the natural Karoo system is now a thriving wildlife area. The maturing landscape has enabled a whole host of indigenous birds and animals to flourish,' he says.

More than 220 bird species have been recorded on Samara, which is very close to the 22 710-hectare Camdeboo Important Bird Area (IBA) that surrounds the town of Graaff-Reinet. Globally Threatened species occurring in this IBA are the Blue Crane, Kori Bustard, Secretarybird, Ludwig's Bustard, Martial Eagle and Black Harrier, while Regionally Threatened species include Verreaux's Eagle, Karoo Korhaan and Lanner Falcon.



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Out in the veld, Oom Pokkie is passing on a lifetime's knowledge to the students. Now 53, he was born on the farm Stoltzhoek in the Beaufort West district that was later acquired as a core property for the Karoo National Park established in 1979. His nickname was bestowed on him at birth by an uncle because it was a cold winter's day with snow (*kapok* in Afrikaans) on the mountains and *kapokbossies* (the wild rosemary shrub *Eriocephalus africanus*) with their small, white flowers in full bloom.

He learnt some of his tracking skills from his father, who earned a living setting gin-traps in the veld for black-backed jackals and caracal in an era when Karoo farmers had zero tolerance for so-called problem animals. 'When I was about 10 to 12 years old I used to walk out in the veld with him,' he recalls. 'I really grew up in the veld – I never liked sitting in one place or at home. And then from the age of about 18 to 20 years, I started to teach myself to really look at spoor and I just got more and more interested in it, learning to see what others don't. I got increasingly better at it and went through the (certification) grades, and then in 2007 I became a master tracker.'

Before joining the academy, Oom Pokkie worked for South African National Parks (SANParks) for 33 years, based at the Karoo National Park. His experience and reputation as a tracker saw SANParks calling on him in June 2015 to help find the three-year-old lion that escaped from the park and evaded capture for three weeks. He found the animal, but it was a job that drew on all his experience and ability. 'That was interesting for me, a good experience, to follow a spoor for so long!' he recalls.

In the field at Samara, Oom Pokkie is supported by Bright Masiye, an academy graduate from Lilydale village in Mpumalanga, who is being mentored for a leadership

role. Part of their training routine involves the pair of them finding the tracks of two or three species close together, marking the area by drawing a circle in the sand, and then calling up the students in pairs to identify the tracks. The students write their answers in their notebooks that are then checked by Bright. On this occasion, six of them manage to identify both species – a guineafowl and a baboon – correctly, even though the tracks are somewhat obscured. 'It's a bit confused,' Oom Pokkie agrees, 'but look, you can see the toenails of the guineafowl and the pad and the toes of the baboon. [This track] is too big for a vervet monkey. A baboon has four lobes on a long, square pad – like your hand but just a bit smaller.'

Next they isolate some tracks and scratch marks in dried mud, and repeat the process. 'Cape Turtle Dove and a swallow collecting mud,' Oom Pokkie whispers to us while the students puzzle over the sand. 'Always after rain you see these signs around.' Most of his students are also up to both this challenge and the next one – tracks made by a frog and a Cape Glossy Starling. 'Okay, well done, guys,' he says, and then adds matter-of-factly: 'I know these things like the back of my hand, it's not difficult for me.'

The students are also required to learn 100 bird calls during their first semester and Janetta proudly points out that, only a few weeks into the course, they're already at 40. But that doesn't mean they don't make mistakes with those 40. Out in the veld, one student hears a bird call in the bush. 'A Greater Honeyguide?' he suggests, but Oom Pokkie, who knows his birds, quickly corrects him: 'That was a Bokmakierie!' The crestfallen student remarks sadly, 'Now I'm *deurmekaar* (confused)!' and his mentor, clearly not one inclined to mollycoddle, agrees: 'Ja, you're *deurmekaar*.'

During a lighter moment when the conversation has strayed momentarily from tracking, Oom Pokkie suggests to his charges – all young men – that they need to learn from birds 'how to approach the ladies'. And the nonplussed students watch as he launches into a lively impression of one of the extraordinary mating dances of the male birds of paradise of New Guinea. Afterwards, by way of explanation, he reveals that he has a video clip on his computer

... HE LAUNCHES INTO A LIVELY IMPRESSION OF ONE OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MATING DANCES OF THE MALE BIRDS OF PARADISE OF NEW GUINEA



ALBERT FRONEMAN



featuring these birds with David Attenborough's narration.

Tracking is not just about looking at spoor on the ground, he emphasises to the students. 'You must be free, relaxed, aware of what's going on around you and using not just your eyes but also your other senses. You must feel happy, relaxed – that's the secret to tracking.'

Janetta says it's not always easy for the new students at Samara. 'They're far from home, they have to share [accommodation, four to a dormitory], it's a new environment, new weather, and there's a lot of work to do. Some of them have some tracking experience they got while working with cattle, but others not. Some have work experience but

not always in conservation, while others were unemployed. But you see them start to settle down after a month or so.'

Settle down they certainly do and, since 2010, 69 of the Academy's 74 graduates have found permanent employment in the conservation industry. Another eight students will graduate at the end of May 2016.

Samara owner Sarah Tompkins says they're 'delighted' to have been part of the academy's founding and to host its operation. She describes Oom Pokkie as 'a rare and extraordinary educator' and Janetta as 'a great mother figure' to the students.

Janetta, in turn, says that watching their students progress and acquire real skills and leadership ability is both immensely rewarding and also 'a little bit humbling' for her and her husband. 'We go to bed and sleep well at night, knowing we've been able to make a change in these people's lives and also in the lives of their relatives. No pay cheque can match that.'

above *The world's heaviest flying bird, the Kori Bustard, leaves its signature on the ground for student trackers to ponder later.*

left *'Oom Pokkie' Benadie gives an impromptu rendition of the mating dance of a male bird of paradise, watched by his student Jerry Sibiya.*