

Clegg news 2008



We've been having a bit of a problem down here in the Namib of late. Its been raining. So the delicate pinks and blues and greys of make the view off the escarpment looking down into the desert just aren't there any more. You just see a wide expanse of grassy prairie that could be anywhere. And when you get down there everything is hidden in grass. So we've been straying off the tourist track a bit this year doing a few more craters, some cats and dogs, trying to avoid thinking about global warming, concentrating instead on excrement, vomit, old boots, the garden and paddling at Crosby.

And I've been doing a bit of revision

on what I'm supposed to be doing now that I'm 64. I should, I found; be handy mending a fuse; be going for rides on Sunday mornings; renting a cottage in the Isle of Wight (if it's not too dear); doing the garden, digging the weeds. Who could ask for more? Well, I've not been doing much of all this in 2008 and frankly, I cant say I really want to. I'm not quite in my dotage yet but I'm well, I'm happy to say, into my grumpage. So here's a bit of it..



This year all the Acacias in Windhoek were covered in flowers. This is a Blackthorn in my garden

I was looking out the other day onto this tree which is an Acacia tree. Acacias are the saviours of Africa and they therefore can't chop them down fast enough to make car parks

and shopping malls. They bring shade; they are habitats in themselves, they grow where nothing else will. And above all, they are legumes which means they are the only things around that have any clue about how to put nitrogen back into the soil. And this year they were all covered in flowers like this; an astonishing site. So astonishing that people noticed.

What is interesting now, though, is that not one Acacia tree anywhere has anything to show for it; not a suspicion of a seed anywhere after such a supreme effort.

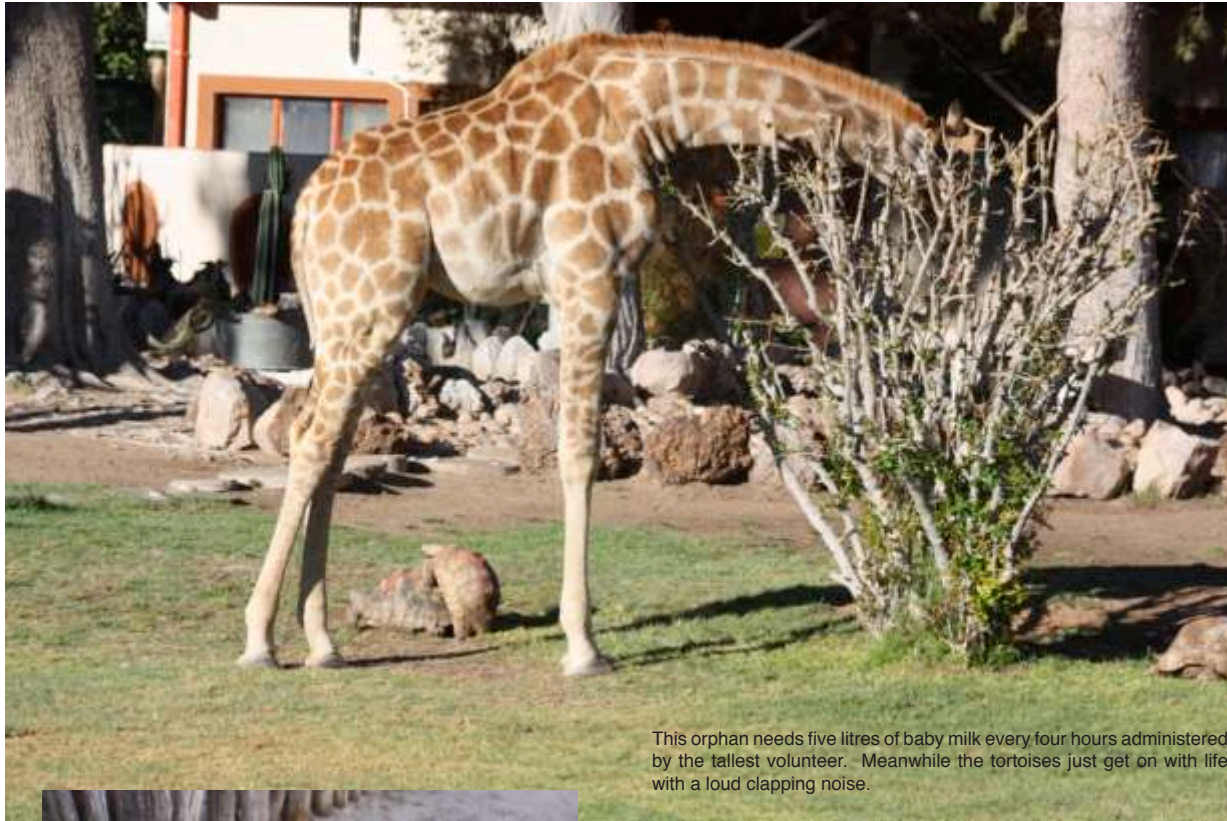
After I looked the other day into two typical African school labs in Botswana and saw the broken furniture, the vandalised electrical sockets, the leaky taps and the teaching equipment still in its original plastic bags of years ago, I realised how the Acacias must feel. All that effort and nothing to show for it. In my case, this year, it has been thirty years effort exactly.

But it's been quite a lot of fun and still is. Just. The fly in the ointment now, however, is that I sense I am experiencing this Africa for the last time. Those bits of Namibia that aren't busy turning themselves into giant theme parks are being dug up by the cubic kilometre by the new rulers to provide uranium for their new paymasters. Currently seven pits each devastating 40 or so square kilometres of pristine Namib.

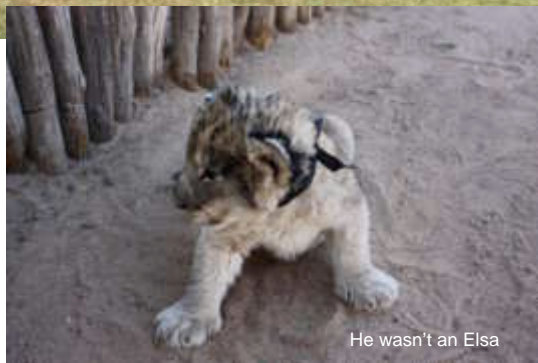
So hurry. Last chance to see.



I'm not sure what to think about Harnas. It falls definitely into the theme park component of Namibia. The road sign as we approached it said 'Harnas Lion Farm' Could be interesting I thought; I've never had lion steaks or lion yoghurt fresh from the dairy. It turned out, however, that it was more a finishing school for lioness film starlets to partner Angelina Jolie. They have had several generations of Elsas and we were allowed to see the latest, in retirement, in her yard. And we also were permitted, of course, to tickle the newest. Only he wasn't an Elsa.



This orphan needs five litres of baby milk every four hours administered by the tallest volunteer. Meanwhile the tortoises just get on with life with a loud clapping noise.



He wasn't an Elsa

*It turned out to be a large ranch where they took in sick animals or animals that would otherwise have died or been shot. They also took in team of about 40 volunteers from all over the world who paid the earth to come for a month or two and signed bit of paper (as did we) to say that if they got eaten it was their own fault. Some do, apparently.*

*What we really came for was the African wild dogs which we would probably never see in the wild. They are critically endangered because they have no habitat left. They need to hunt over huge areas and are Africa's natural distance runners, chasing*



Its quite common, apparently, for male dogs to lose ears during mating excesses.

The maladjusted baboon cooler. He calls you over for a photo-op and then pees in your lens



*their prey until it falls, driving it around in circles so that they can hand over to a new set, relay-like. They are highly intelligent and organised, taking food back to the old, the injured and the pups. But here, confined to their field, there was little sign of social order in the ones we saw and some had lost it and had had to be separated altogether from the main pack.*





was not entirely a good idea, so she is called Cat instead. We have belled her because of her habit of catching mousebirds and plucking them in Santjie's underwear drawer.



Friskies, Chunky Fish, vier uur, dankie

just the right angle (I drove away hastily), no unaccompanied two year-old exploring the fresh leopard spoor. No discovery of overnight lion spoor as in the riverbed as I was returning from an early morning jog (they told me there weren't any). Just a few good photo-ops.



Everyone wants a pic of a leopard up a tree so they throw a bit of donkey up there to persuade it to oblige

The problem with real African cats though, is that although they are quite common, with the exception of the cheetah, you just don't see them. You know they are there because of their clawless foot-marks - though the cheetah can't actually retract its claws - which are quite surprisingly common. So this year we decided we would like to see more than the footprints and this was another reason for going to Harnas.



So there is not much to tell about our encounter with them; no prowling around the campfire, only eyes visible, as I remember from the Kalahari, no crazy Italian tourists rushing up to the pride to get



It's been the year of the cat. I arrived back from England early in the year to find that Santjie and I had new jobs. We had been selected to the staff of a small black cat who had decided that her previous employees over the fence were not attending to quite all her needs in the manner she wished, and who wanted to get away from her sister who was bigger than she was. She is completely black, sleeps most of the time and when she is awake whines incessantly. So I suggested we should call her SWAPO. Santjie seemed to think, however, that this

The Cheetah may be the fastest runner on land but it's usually so exhausted after the effort that any passing hyena can help itself to the catch. So its not doing all that well. And its penchant for goats does not help. Harnas has over 20 and its sad to see them reduced to captive animals that nervously follow the same short circular path in their field, day in, day out.



The Rooikat is quite widespread like the Leopard but I've only ever got to see the odd ear in the long grass.



One of the enjoyable features of living, as a superannuated scientist, in a tiny but cosmopolitan capital is that you can get to go along to a whole range of lectures, at a few minutes notice, that in England would involve a day out. A memorable one this year was by an American Scientist called Gene Domack who works on the Larsen Ice Shelf. That's the one that you can see falling apart in 'An Inconvenient Truth', that film by Al Gore (the US Vice President who scuppered the Kyoto Accords and won the Nobel Peace Prize). Domack told



The Messum. 400 Square kilometers of extinct volcano, home to thousands of Welwitschia mirabilis, an ancient plant in a genus of its own, and this year also to a mass of grass and birds

us all about why it fell apart and how it's been building up to falling apart for quite a long time and, most interestingly, how the collapse of the shelf led to a sudden slide into the sea of all the land-based glaciers that it was holding back. Like breaking the metal band holding together a barrel; a 16m drop in the ice level in just a couple of years. Ice does not have to melt to cause the seas to rise; it just has to slide off the land.

What has particularly interested me over the last few years is the evolution of a now prevailing view that we are well into a major 'extinction event' (biospeak for we are all going to die) which they have called the Holocene extinction. 20,000 years ago it got our cousins, H neanderthalenis, 8000 years ago it got our other newly found cousins, the Hobbits of Java, and we, the general view is, are probably now high on the list if we dont do something quick.

Domack, as an afterthought, spoke quietly about a change that another group they worked with had come across. This was that C-14 analysis of coral near the ice shelf showed a suddenly reversal of a trend in that the most recent coral now

contained the oldest, not the newest, carbon, a change in just the last decade which could only be explained by a reversal of the thermohaline water circulation in the area bringing old carbon up from the depths rather than taking the new carbon down. Now, if you are keen to avoid becoming extinct, a thermohaline reversal is not good news. The water at the bottom of the polar seas is 10 degrees higher than the water at the top and sea ice, like the Larsen, could well have started melting from the bottom up. The mass extinction, later in the year, also anthropic in origin, of half my pension seemed trivial by comparison.



This year we went cratering again. There are a number of obvious craters in Namibia and the general view of the local geologists seems to be that they arose when Namibia was





These may seem mundane but they are the miracle of the Namib. During the night we were there the mist rolled in from the cold Benguela sea. Every plant and animal in the Namib has evolved to condense and harvest every drop. Welwitschia above and the desert grass right



knocked around a bit at various times in the last 500 million years. The Messum crater came about, they say, some 200 million years ago when Argentina started wandering off from Walvis Bay. It was a big shallow volcano that bubbled away for many thousands of years, heated by a hot spot in the earth's crust that is now under Tristan da Cunha. We went last year but returned this because we wanted to see what happens to it when it rains - which it did, a lot, this year.

For a crater of some 400 square kilometres it's surprisingly elusive and even on our second visit it took half a day to find. Maybe I should stop to explain that these bits of Namibia don't have roads or signposts, just a few small tracks leading now and then off bigger tracks to nowhere in particular, along which you go alone in a twelve year old vehicle only if you have a prodigious trust in the makers of Landrovers or are just daft. The former is probably symptomatic of the latter.



Little dancing men. Only about 10cm tall



A Welwitschia seedling. A rare sighting. This happens two or three times a century. With a bit of luck it will grow for the next few thousand years. Welwitschia time is different from our time

But suddenly there it was; this time a massive expanse of absolutely flat grassland at haytime. An expanse of silver in the middle of the desert. Quelea finches were cheeping everywhere in huge numbers on the world's biggest cricket pitch. The only cricket pitch with Welwitschias round the boundary.



Santjie, sitting on a primeval natural magnet. The North Pole is roughly below her bottom. A Welwitschia is creeping up behind

And we even found the rock art we missed last time. (Well I didn't because of my colourblindness. But, as always, I just point the camera at a bare rock face, look at it in the viewer and lo, it's suddenly covered in little dancing men).



“You cant miss it, its on the left” said the man at the Save the Rhino camp that we arrived at after leaving the Messum. We were on our way to the Doros crater and this one was only 4 square kilometres and so I was a bit worried. Its very easy to miss things in Namibia; craters especially.

Then we got talking about interesting things like rhinos. This mainly uninhabited edge of the Namib is the last place in the world where the black rhino (the short-tempered one) is still a wild animal roaming the countryside. There are just a couple of hundred or so left. Thanks to the Save the Rhino



Looking south across the Doros crater, Damaraland . Probably a meteorite impact. In the distant left is the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain

Trust and donors like the David Shepherd Foundation (not the cricketer, the one that made a fortune painting elephants at sunset) numbers are now slowly increasing. But there is the usual problem.

There are lots of people out there who will willingly pay 5 million dollars or so for the pleasure of killing a big rare animal. And if you are sitting on a bit of land where there are a few hundred of them, as is the government of Namibia, that is an awful lot of new secondary schools. So if you have a few million and you fancy helping one of the last remaining megafauna into extinction, Namibia is your place.

The Rhino camp is on the Ugab, one of those rivers that flows for a week or so each year to take Namibia's topsoil and a cubic kilometre of its rainwater out into the south Atlantic. But today it was a sandy riverbed. We crossed it and took the track to the Doros. It was a steep climb up from the riverbed over rough boulders that meant that not all the wheels were in contact with the ground all the time. The Rhino camp man told us to take care as he was getting a bit tired of bringing back dead tourists.

We got to 20 47 29 S 14 06 59 E, turned left and got as far as 20 41 33 S 14 19 52 E where the Doros should have been

but there was no sign of a crater (GPS screens in Namibia just have numbers showing where you are, no roads or tracks except the one you have just made. And the Doros does not have a postcode). So we called it a day, drove up a river a bit, and camped.

Rising early the following morning, we wondered briefly whether the fresh three-toed rhino spoor in the riverbed around the tent had been there, unnoticed, the night before and then we decided that the 200m high wall of stones next to us might just be a crater after all. So we headed for what looked like a lone Moringa tree at the top. Although I was wrong about the tree (it was a Star Chestnut for those interested) I was right about the crater and we found ourselves looking down(ish) into a perfect caldera now full, like the rest of southern Damaraland, of grass. This one didn't look volcanic though, more like a meteorite impact.

One thing I noticed as we went further north on the track was that the herds of springbok were smaller and appeared disturbed. This year's good rain had led elsewhere to a lot of young being born and the herds looking very healthy which they showed with excessive pronking displays that make this most common antelope always my favourite. The Rhino camp man had warned us that we would probably not see much game in the area now because of the hunting concessions.

On the whole, in Namibia, the hunting element of the tourist industry does much to conserve the countryside but this seems to be an area where too many concessions are being sold. There seems to be, inevitably, I suppose, a new generation of Namibians emerging, a small number of whom don't know a Springbok from a Zebra, or care about either, and have never seen southern Damaraland because it's not accessible by BMW. But they are good at selling hunting concessions.



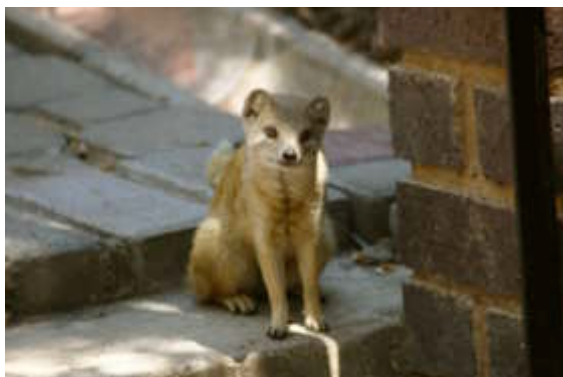
The Doros - Google earth. We camped top left in the riverbed that is just visible



I knew it was not going to be an ordinary day when I looked out of the window and saw hundreds of swallows flying fast and low around the garden. It was a termite day. We'd just had the second big rain and this was a signal for the annual Namibian mass copulation to commence. It's all got to be completed while it's still damp.

The termites were the first. They suddenly grow wings and, after a fertilisation frenzy below ground, millions fly off in the hope of finding a hole before something finds them. They land, their wings unhook and fall off and they crawl around helplessly being lapped up by everything. I once saw a frog in Botswana so full he could not get both front legs on the ground at the same





Our yellow mongoose. He (or she) comes for the snakes that breed in the compost heap and also for mature Somerset cheddar that I bring from the farm shop whenever I'm back in England

time. The termites bring out the centipedes and the centipedes bring out the gekkos and the gekkos bring out the snakes and the snakes bring out the mongooses. A frantic seething food chain gorging itself.



The chungalulus seem to spend quite a long time sorting out the leg geometry



Not so, the snails

The snails and the millipedes also all rush to get in on the copulatory action and we have to take care where we tread. All has to be conceived, delivered and grow before things dry out again.

One or two animals in the garden, however, indulge in a rather more pre-planned way. We have a wasp that is black and 2-3 cm long. This one is has found one of our larger spiders with an abdomen the size and shape of a good-sized garlic clove. She has paralysed it (except for the feet which still wriggle) and the wasp here is pulling her up a 3m vertical wall to her hole where she will lay her eggs in the spiders abdomen. The little offspring will then gradually eat her alive from within. Eventually, fully consumed, she will die.



An edible nursery.



Excrement, vomit and old boots. I've been revising my GCSE Chemistry book again and giving it a historical flavour - or rather, smell.

The vomit element comes from the SS Great Britain exhibition, well worth the trip to Bristol if only to get a whiff, in one of the cabins, of isovaleric acid, a very close relative of vinegar and the essence of seasickness - and of the cheesy element of old



Flying compost heaps. Spot the fish

boots. Interestingly it is also found in human pubertal vaginal secretions and is a powerful pheromone. Hence it is also the essence of all good teenage perfumes. All this, and so much more, as they say, in the book.

The excrement element of the book takes us back to Namibia in the middle of the nineteenth century. Not many people know this, certainly not Namibians, but at that time this country was the shit capital of the world. At the heart of this were huge numbers of pelicans, flying compost heaps that took in fish at one end and produced an ideal mix of nitrates and phosphates at the other.

They, and a host of other composters had been doing this century in, century out, on the barren desert islands off the coast. So it was that Germans arrived in their boats, always with a sharp eye open for commercial opportunities back home, and filled them full of the piles of birdshit which was there for the taking.



A deserted house on Halifax Island, once a centre of the world's fertiliser industry, now occupied by Jackass penguins whose forbears precipitated its construction. Spot the Jackass.

Ichaboe Island was the most famous. It is a desert island of about 1.5 hectares, with no food or water, on which, 150 years ago some 6000 people lived to harvest the guano that then covered the island to a depth of a reported 8m. It is recorded that in December 1844 some 400 ships could be counted anchored offshore. The guano trade made fortunes, started wars and created the modern boundaries of many countries. Digging for fertiliser only declined in the early twentieth century as the main resources were depleted and stopped overnight when Fritz Haber discovered a way of manufacturing it out of air.

Sadly, there is no record of the conversation that must have, at some time, taken place between the Germans and the local Nama chief when they explained what they were up to. That we know such a conversation did place is now part of history. We know that the Headman agreed, for a small payment, that such activities could continue and that the area around Lüderitz could be used as a landing station coming under German ownership and control. What use was Lüderitz to him anyway? Just take the money and run.

It was shortly after this that a Lüderitz port railwayman, crawling around on the ground for some reason unspecified, picked up a rather interesting hard bright little pebble.....

It is difficult for us to realise these days how important was the move from digging up fertiliser - or any chemical come to that - to manufacturing it. In particular I can never imagine such as this ever being written about a fertiliser factory.

There's an island that lies on West Africa's shore,  
Where penguins have lived since the flood or before,  
And raised up a hill there, a mile high or more,  
This hill is all guano, and lately 'tis shown,  
That finer potatoes and turnips are grown  
By means of this compost, than ever were known;  
And the peach, the nectarine, the apple, the pear,  
Attain such a size, that the gardeners stare,  
And cry, "Well, I never saw fruit like that 'ere!"  
One cabbage thus reared, as a paper maintains,  
Weighed twenty-one stone, thirteen pounds and six grains,  
So no wonder Guano celebrity gains. (Anon, 1845)

(Twenty-one stone, thirteen pounds and six grains is one hundred and thirty nine kilograms, two hundred and fifty two grams and fifty six milligrams but that doesn't scan quite as well)



The environs of Liverpool, once the home of the world trade in excrement, is now the home of my grandson and is also the current European City of Culture. All three, I think, coincidental.

There is a lot of culture around there at the moment, particularly, up the coast in Crosby which you can go and see if you wrap up well and put on long wellies. Its called 'Another Place'; I'm not quite sure why, unless it is to distinguish it from

Liverpool. It's a collection of bronze castings of and by the naked Anthony Gormley in various stages of immersion, neither waving nor drowning, all apparently watching the windfarm out in the estuary. We were there last month.



Best wishes for 2009



Ulla Kann



*Spending donor aid money wisely and productively and ensuring that its impact is lasting is much more difficult than most people might think. Ulla spent most of her life helping countries in Africa to do just that.*

*She was very highly regarded professionally and much loved by her friends across the continent. She left Namibia and Africa two years ago to return to her native Sweden and to her grandchildren who gave her immense pride and pleasure.*

*I first met her 30 years ago when she was a planner in Ministry in Botswana and last saw her when she stayed with us at the end of last year on what she knew then was probably her farewell visit to Namibia. She came for a meeting of the working group of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) of which she had long been a member.*

*Ulla died in February this year and is missed by very many people in many countries. This recent photograph of her on the beach in Swakopmund was sent to me by her daughter, Nina*