

# AFRICAN HERP NEWS

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comparison. Bill Stanley gave us specimens collected during his small mammal research in the Nguus and Alan Channing aided in the identification of some specimens.

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### NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

*African Herp News* publishes brief notes concerning the biology of the herpetofauna of the African continent and adjacent regions, including the Arabian peninsula, Madagascar, and other islands in the Indian ocean.

A standard format is to be used, as follows: **SCIENTIFIC NAME**; Common name (using Bill Branch's *Field Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Southern Africa*, third edn. 1998, for reptiles; and Passmore & Carruthers' *South African frogs*, 1995, for amphibians as far as possible); **KEYWORD** (this should be one or two words best describing the topic of the note, eg. Reproduction, Avian predation, etc.); the Text (in concise English with only essential references quoted and in abbreviated form); **Locality** (country, province or state, location, quarter-degree unit, and latitude and longitude if available; elevation above sea level; use metric units); **Date** (day, month, year); **Collector(s)**; **Place of deposition and museum accession number** (required if specimens are preserved).

Submitted by: **NAME**, Address (in parentheses).

### REPTILIA TESTUDINES

### TESTUDINIDAE *Geochelone pardalis* Leopard Tortoise

#### Fire avoidance

According to Boycott & Bourquin (2000. *The Southern African tortoise book*. Russel Friedman Books, Halfway House, South Africa) one of the greatest threats to tortoises is veld fires with many burnt every year especially in slow burns during daylight hours over the hot summer months when tortoises are most active. An exception to the rule is the Geometric Tortoise (*Psammobates geometricus*) from the Western Cape which could well be fire adapted (Boycott & Bourquin, *op. cit.*). Branch (1998 *Field guide to snakes and other reptiles of Southern Africa*. Struik, Cape Town) mentions that the Leopard Tortoise

(*Geochelone pardalis*), which is widespread throughout the savanna areas of Southern Africa, including Namibia, succumbs to veld fires.

Whilst fighting a veld fire due west of Windhoek in the foothills of the Kaiser Wilhelm Mountains (Namibia - Highland Savanna; Giess 1971. A provisional vegetation map of South West Africa. *Dinteria* 4) during the late afternoon in August, an adult Leopard Tortoise was observed avoiding the fire by climbing into a Trumpet Thorn bush (*Catophractes alexandri*). The tortoise was approximately 30cm off the ground when first noticed and subsequently fell out of the bush after which it was righted and inspected for burn damage before being released. The fire had recently passed by and had consumed the grass cover in the vicinity, although the bush in which the tortoise had taken refuge had not ignited. The tortoise was not damaged during this incident, as far as could be determined, except for watery eyes, possibly caused by the smoke.

From this observation it is clear that tortoises - a Leopard Tortoise in this case - have the ability to avoid fires by climbing into vegetation. This method of fire avoidance would probably be ineffective in hot fires when shrubs/bush would also be consumed by fire.

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## REPTILIA SAURIA

### GEKKONIDAE

#### *Pachydactylus turneri* Turner's Thick-toed Gecko

#### Diet

During a spell of intense termite (*Hodotermes mossambicus*) activity after rainfall in Windhoek, Namibia, on the third and fifth of December 2002, we observed a feeding frenzy by three species of lizards actively utilizing the termites. The species involved were *Mabuya spilogaster* (Kalahari Tree Skink), *Agama aculeata* (Ground Agama) and *Pachydactylus turneri* (Turner's Thick-toed Gecko). The skinks and agamas were the most visible and present in large numbers although the most interesting sighting was that of the gecko. The time that the observations were made (both days) was between 16h00 and 17h00 with sunset only occurring around 19h00 during this time of the year.

Thick-toed Geckos are classified as nocturnal although some of the larger species are often found foraging on prey items from the safety of their shelters during daylight hours (Branch 1998 *Field guide to snakes and other reptiles of Southern Africa*. Struik, Cape Town). *Pachydactylus turneri* is one of these large geckos with the individual observed feeding on the termites being an adult male (SVL 85mm & Tail 65mm). The gecko was foraging on the termites in an open parking area approximately 3-4m from the closest suitable cover. This individual actively pursued 18 termites before retreating to cover and then proceeded to prey on a further 18 termites passing it before calling it a day (5/12/2002). A total of 36 termites of approximately 15-20mm in size each were consumed within 5 minutes. *Hodotermes mossambicus* have previously been identified in the diet of *Ptenopus garrulus maculatus*, *Chondrodactylus angulifer angulifer*, *Pachydactylus bibronii*, *Pachydactylus mariquensis latirostris* and *Pachydactylus punctatus* from the Keetmanshoop area in Southern Namibia (Bauer *et al.* 1989 *S. Afr. J. Zool.* 24: 239-243). According to Bauer *et al.* (*op. cit.*) geckos might even be able to "predict", via environmental cues, localized outbreaks of arthropod prey.

The fact that the *P. turneri* individual observed feeding on *H. mossambicus* termites in Windhoek was prepared to throw caution to the wind indicated that the benefits of partaking in this exceptional feast outweighed the possible threats it could have encountered away from cover during daylight hours.

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