

KALAHARI MEERKAT PROJECT

Safety issues & other considerations

Living at the Kuruman River Reserve

For your own safety and well being:

- Ensure you have health/travel insurance and that the project has a copy of these details
- Make sure the Project has current details of your next of kin
- Familiarise yourself with our emergency procedures, and the locations of First Aid kits, the fire extinguisher and emergency telephone numbers. Don't rely on other people knowing where things are and what to do; you may be the only person around when an emergency happens.
- After any type of accident, make sure you fill in the accident register
- You must undertake a full Health and Safety talk with the project leader or a trained representative from the meerkat project

There are doctors, dentists, pharmacies and hospitals in Kuruman, Kathu and Upington. There is a police station in Vanzylsrus.

Unlike much of South Africa, this part of the Northern Cape does not have a problem with crime and the Project has had virtually no thefts. However, please lock the cars (and garage doors) at night and when you leave them parked on the road, and lock the house when no one is at home. (Be sure you have a key to the house so you don't get unexpectedly locked out). It's probably worth locking your caravan or rondavel door when you're not about, and avoid leaving valuables lying around prominently, particularly on the veranda or in the garden.

Safety around the house

- Take care when handling electrical sockets, plugs, adapters, etc, and bear in mind that the electrical wiring in the house is old, largely makeshift, and was not designed for our heavy use.
- Never walk around the house and garden in bare feet, particularly at night. Cape Cobras have been seen in the garden several times, and scorpions do occasionally make their way into the house. You should always switch on the light or carry a torch when going to the bathroom in the night.
- If you break glass or china, please be very diligent about sweeping it all up, and wrapping the fragments before putting them into the garbage bin. Similarly, immediately clean up any spills of potentially slippery stuff (e.g. oil).
- When handling boxes, furniture, etc. (particularly in the storeroom, garage or on the veranda), check for spiders and scorpions first. You can recognise Brown & Black Widow Spiders by their pea-shaped abdomen, narrow thorax and red hourglass pattern on the ventral surface of the abdomen. If you are bitten (bites are not fatal, except to small children), apply a pressure bandage (as for snakebite, on page 3) and go to a local hospital for treatment.

Safety in the field

Getting lost

Familiarise yourself with the layout of roads, fences and the river. Always carry a GPS, radio (2 way!) and a torch. Stay aware of where you are when walking with the meerkats (i.e. note the number of dunes you've crossed, what fences you've climbed, any land marks or burrow-markers that you've passed, etc).

Once you are lost, don't panic. Someone will come looking for you, when you don't return at the usual time. Try climbing a high dune or tree to see if you can see the road, wind-pump, river, fence or power lines. It may be possible to follow your footprints back the way you've come. Don't risk contracting heat-stroke; if it's very hot, radio for a lift then sit in the shade and wait for someone to come and pick you up. Similarly, if you are lost after a couple of hours, just sit down and listen for people calling you and watch for lights if it's dark.

Heat-stroke, sunburn, dehydration

The Kalahari is hot in summer! Always wear plenty of sunscreen. Beware of doing anything energetic in the middle of the day. Never go out in the field without a hat and water between September and April, and make a conscious effort to drink plenty of water throughout the day. Remember that you can suffer dehydration without feeling thirsty. Symptoms include nausea, headache, dizziness, light-headedness and a restless feeling of non-specific discomfort and ill-ease.

If you are feeling badly discomforted by the heat, rest in the shade for a few minutes if you find you are not improving radio for help immediately. If you stop sweating, the situation is serious, and you must cool yourself down immediately. Retreat to the shade/house, douse yourself with cold water or submerge yourself in a cold bath or in the pool, and drink plenty of cold drinks.

Ostriches and other game

The farms in our area stock ostriches as well as cattle, sheep and goats. Ostriches are usually shy of people and run away when they see you (take care not to panic these birds). Occasionally, however, a breeding male (recognisable by the red flush on the front of his legs) becomes aggressive. In addition many of the surrounding farms and also the Kuruman River Reserve, have potentially dangerous game species including Eland, Wildebeest, Gemsbok and Red Hartebeest, single territorial males can be highly aggressive. Keep an eye open for the birds at all times (the meerkats usually give a rolling alarm call when they see an ostrich approaching). At regular intervals check your surroundings for climbable trees, large piles of dead timber and fences, so that you always know where you can escape if an ostrich attacks. Do not approach any game species directly and maintain at least 50 metres distance at all times, ensuring there is an available tree to climb or other such escape route. Never approach game closer than this distance and always back off if they approach you. If you are dealing with a solitary male we advise that you maintain at least 100 metres distance.

Scorpions

Scorpions are active at night (although you'll see meerkats eating them by day) so don't walk around after dark without footwear and torch. If you see a scorpion in the house, warn other people. Four species of scorpion occur here. There are two species of Burrowing Scorpion (Shiny and Cape) who have big chelipeds (front pincers) and small tails, and two species (the Cape Scorpion and the thick-tailed Granulated Scorpion) who have small chelipeds and a large, thick tail. If you get stung by a

scorpion, look closely at its tail and front pincers so you know which species it is. The sting of the first two species is very painful but not dangerous. Take painkillers and apply an ice pack to reduce the pain. The sting of the second species is much more serious and *can be fatal without medical treatment*. Apply a pressure bandage (as for snake bite, see below), apply an ice-pack and go to the nearest hospital straight away (ring ahead to let them know you are coming). You have several hours before serious symptoms develop.

Snakes

A number of different species occur here, but the most common venomous species are the Cape Cobra (yellow, gold or mottled yellow and brown with chocolate-button eyes) and the Puff Adder (short, thick, diamond-patterned and - when threatened - sounds like a deflating football).

- Use a torch when walking back from the group in the evening and pay attention to where you put your feet (finish entering data on your Psion BEFORE starting to walk back). Puff adders tend to lie cryptically on paths waiting for small rodents to stumble on them.
- Stomp (but not when you're with the meerkats) so snakes will feel the vibrations and get out of your way. Puff adders don't tend to move away, but will puff (a rushing air sound) if they know you're about to step on them.
- Where boots or closed shoes
- Where long trousers
- Stand well back when the meerkats mob a snake
- Do not touch or handle ANY snake (even if it appears dead), as species identification is difficult, colour can vary greatly, and some species "play dead".
- Do not put up your hand down holes or under fallen timber
- Do not walk around outside at night without a torch (this includes the garden)

If you get bitten, don't panic. Make sure you know what the snake looks like (for identification purposes) but don't try to catch or kill it, call for help on your radio immediately and know where you are.

Puff adder bite

If you are bitten by a puff adder, DO NOT apply a pressure bandage or tourniquet, or cut the wound; all these things will make things worse. Puff adder venom is cytotoxic: it does not move around the body and is slow acting, but it breaks down the cells at the site of the bite. Stay calm; adults very rarely die from puff adder bites. Call for help on the radio and give your location then wait for them to arrive. If you cannot contact anyone, go to the nearest help or, if someone is with you, stay where you are while they go get a vehicle. Keep warm (use a blanket or a coat even if you don't *feel* at all cold) and drink sips of water slowly, twiddle the extremities of any affected limb, to prevent shock from setting in. Phone the hospital for their advice and to let them know you are coming, then get there as quickly as possible.

Cobra bite

If the snake was a cape cobra, you should **immediately apply a pressure bandage and immobilise the limb**. Cobra venom is neurotoxic; it travels around the body via the lymphatic system and the blood and affects your nervous system. Fluid is pushed around the lymphatic system by the pressure of moving muscles and joints, this also

increases blood flow. A firm bandage slows the flow of the lymph and blood, as does immobilising the limb's muscles and joints.

Ideally, use a broad elastic bandage, or you can make do with strips of torn up clothing. You should quickly bandage the whole limb as firmly as you would for a sprain, starting at the bottom of the limb (below the bite) and working upwards. Mark the site of the bite on the outside of the bandage. (If, when you press the extremity of the bandaged limb (i.e. the fingers or toes), the press-mark stays white (i.e. it does not go pink again as the blood returns), the bandage is too tight. **DO NOT REMOVE IT** (until you are with a doctor at the hospital), but you can cut every second turn of the bandage, 2/3rds of the way through the bandage's width, to loosen it.) Ideally, the limb should be splinted so you can't move it. (Use a sturdy branch, plank or folded aerial, lie it along the bandaged limb, and bind it on, above and below each joint. It should be positioned so that the joints can't bend).

If the bite is not on a limb, use your hand to press firmly on the area around the bite.

If you are with someone else, you should lie down and relax while they go for help (your limb must be bandaged, however). Make sure that they take careful note of exactly where you are located. They should then go as rapidly as possible to the nearest point of help and begin emergency evacuation. Phone and **ring for a helicopter ambulance, and phone the hospital** to check they're prepared for your arrival (i.e. they have the appropriate anti-venom). Cape Cobra venom is fast acting, you only have about an hour to two hours before the symptoms start becoming more serious. (We have a small quantity of (out of date) cobra anti-venom, but only use this if advised to by medical personnel.)

If you are alone, bandage your limb firmly, and then make your way to help (e.g. go to the nearest person who can then go to the phone, etc.) as quickly as possible. Try not to use the bitten limb (it will help to splint it) because it's muscle movement that pushes the poison away from the site of the bite. Once you've reached help, keep warm (use a jacket or blanket even if you don't *feel* cold) and drinks lots of water, to prevent shock. Remember that venomous snakes frequently bite without injecting venom (they don't want to waste it on you!).

Lightning:

Do not stay out in the field when lightning is closer than 1.5 km, typically the rain will have caused you to leave by then any way. If you are concerned that lightning is occurring very close to you, remove all metal items (including Zips, earrings and belts) and crouch in a low area away from any trees with your feet together.

Fences:

Please bear in mind how risky fence climbing is and only ever cross where there are very sturdy fence posts. Be exceptionally careful to remove any items hanging around your neck that could become caught if you fell.

Vehicles and driving

- To drive project vehicles on public roads, you must have a valid drivers licence from your home country, a valid international drivers licence, and be listed on the MRI's insurance list.
- When driving on public roads, you must wear a seat-belt even if you are a passenger and/or you're only going a short way (e.g. to Vivian group).
- The speed limits set for project vehicles are: 30km/hr on the reserve and other farms, 60km/hr on dirt roads along the study populations, 80km/hr on dirt roads otherwise and 100km/hr on tarred roads.
- The Old white and Grey Toyota 4 X 4's must not be driven on public roads as it is not registered or insured.
- Anyone driving a project vehicle must not have consumed ANY alcohol before hand.
- Do not travel or drive with anyone in the back of a bakkie on public roads
- check tyres, wheelnuts, spare, jack, water and oil before leaving on a trip, always phone upon arrival
- Avoid picking up hitch-hikers. You will often have to take local people with you on trips to Vanzylrus, and give others a ride back, but do not carry passengers in the back of the bakkies when driving long distances (e.g. to or from Kuruman).

Motorbikes:

- Volunteers are not allowed on motorbikes under any circumstances
- Non-volunteers may only drive motorbikes if they have a current motorbike license, but they must never carry a passenger
- Crash helmets should be worn at all times

Getting along with the local community

Please bear in mind that the Meerkat Project is highly dependent on the good will of the local Afrikaner community, so it is very important that we do nothing to offend them.

- Do not become involved in political or religious discussions. Remember that you are in someone else's country, and you must be tolerant of their views.
- Be careful not to swear or blaspheme in front of the local Afrikaners (seemingly innocent expressions like "Oh God" can cause offence)
- **Always go out of your way to greet people and be friendly**, stand up when they enter the room, offer them tea/coffee, and learn to use a few Afrikaans greetings.
- Do not wear very short, very tight, see-through or sexy clothing. The local community considers this to be extremely vulgar and distasteful. When wearing swimwear, do not walk around in front of the farm.
- Do not smoke dope or use any other drug while at the Farm or in Vanzylrus. Take care to behave decorously while in Vanzylrus (including visits to the pub).
- Do not drive off-road (stick to the tracks) without specific permission, leave all gates as you find them, and be careful not to frighten stock (ostriches and springbok are particularly prone to running into fences and injuring themselves). Notify the farmer if you see any sick or injured stock, and if you find a baby goat all alone in the middle of nowhere, LEAVE IT THERE. (For the first few days

after birth, mother goats leave their kids hidden away in the shrubbery, visiting them surreptitiously just a couple of times a day)

- Take care when using the water pump. Our water is pumped from an underground spring,