

# Toktok Talkie

by Joh Henschel



## Dryness deserts Desert

Droughts are not supposed to occur in the Namib, because a desert is dry by definition. The Namib is said to be one of the driest of the hot deserts on earth, only exceeded in dryness by the Atacama, our counterpart on the west coast of South America. What do we say when a hyperarid desert gets wet? Earlier in 2011 the dryness temporarily deserted the Namib Desert, and the result was a picnic for all!

As every Namib toktokkie knows, the immense rainfall early this year was a once-in-a-lifetime event. The desert temporarily became quite un-desertlike the way it greened, blossomed and became unusually productive. Right now, months later, times are still good for the toktokkies. For many years they and their predators have something to chew on. The mass of grass seeds on which toktokkies feed will, however, slowly dissipate, getting trapped in depressions and crevices, and buried with wind-blown sand. Later, in months, years or decades, wind will blow some of the sand away again, uncovering seeds, and toktokkies thus have a continuous trickle of food coming their way, but this will decline with time. After the present population boom, numbers will gradually decline over the course of the next decade or two and only a few toktokkies, several generations beyond the current veterans, will be there to receive the next good rain. This good rain was like a super pulse with a very long time-shadow. The Namib functions from pulse to pulse, bridging the long gaps with sustenance from the larder as well as nifty ways of obtaining nourishment from other humble sources.

These rains were also an injection of vitality for many other creatures. Take springbok and mountain zebras, which formed huge congregations where the young grass was greenest and juiciest and got fat on this bonanza before returning to their scattered herds to raise their many young. Their proliferation was bettered by sparrow-larks and lark-like buntings. Namib ostrich, not known to be slouches, followed suit and established large kindergartens, which have by now progressed to good-sized flocks roaming the landscape. By now the dry grass is somewhat harder to chew and digest, and predators are chomping their way through their own bonanza, which will steadily dwindle.

The rains topped up groundwater stores, and deep-rooted shrubs and trees which tap into these aquifers are now flourishing, as are the creatures living under their canopies. Left alone, this condition will persist for many years, and the groundwater levels will drop slowly as plants use it or it gradually seeps away. Again there is this pattern of a super-pulse with an extended after-effect.

Zophosis moralesi muses that as the Namib returns to being desert, thirsty times resume. Populations will again trickle down to a few die-hards which will await the next rain and kick-start the next boom. But if in the meantime these die-hards are kicked down by what people are doing to the desert, there may be no new kick-start again.

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