



## Gecko of Wlotzkasbaken

When Paul Wlotzka built the first shelter in Wlotzkasbaken in the early 1930s he did not realise on whose turf he was. Nor do thousands of anglers and tourists annually flocking to this quaint village with its multi-coloured cottages, each with its own water tower, know that there is more to Wlotzkasbaken's claim to fame than spectacular fishing, colourful fields of thick lichen and Damara tern nests. This is, in fact, the only place on earth where one can find Marais' Gecko, *Pachydactylus maraisi*, a new species described this October.

As every Namib toktokkie knows, there are more species around us than we know. Even when an unidentifiable organism has been found, it still requires further collecting at the same location and elsewhere to obtain more information on its characteristics and to determine whether these are sufficiently different from what is known to constitute a distinctive species. Today, DNA reveals these differences most tellingly, allowing us to use so-called molecular phylogeny to reveal degrees of similarity and differences among species. In addition, details of appearance are described which serve to identify the species. One single specimen is designated as the holotype, in other words, all subsequent identification is with reference to this one individual. But to be sure, several paratypes are also designated, including the other gender to match the holotype specimen. The author(s) of the scientific paper describing a species give it a scientific name, which must be a unique combination of species name for that genus.

True to its genus name, *Pachydactylus* is a gecko the size of a thick finger. Namibia now has at least 36 *Pachydactylus* species, a spectacular number. The species name, *maraisi*, honours Johan Marais as the person who collected and provided information on type specimens. *Pachydactylus maraisi* is a real beauty. It is dark chocolate marmite in colour, delicately star-spangled all over its top side, with relatively large eyes. Why it was overlooked until now could be because when it ventures out at night it might perhaps be mistaken for an errant part of the starry Namib sky. By day this gecko squeezes its flattened body into secret vantage points in narrow rock crevices and has thus managed to avoid drawing attention to its existence until now.

With industrial development plans encroaching onto Marais' gecko, there is real concern for the future of this newest addition to the Namib's natural wonders. Fortune has it that the 2000 ha area where this vulnerable gecko occurs fall into the Dorob National Park. Since we know little else about this gecko than its name and occurrence, it is now very important to conduct detailed field research to find out what makes this species tick so it can be protected.

Zophosis moralesi rejoices that somebody was looking close enough at our wonderful biodiversity to discover this beauty, but there are probably many more discoveries to be made. Moralesi trusts that good sense will prevail for the conservation of this gecko of Wlotzkasbaken.

EnviroMEND: joh.henschel@mweb.com.na