

# Toktok Talkie

by Joh Henschel



## The Little Prince's Secret

"What makes the desert beautiful," said the Little Prince, "is that somewhere it is hiding a well." From personal experience, author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry knew only too well that water, elixir of life, is a desert's best-kept secret.

As every Namib toktokkie knows, life on earth has evolved largely around the unique properties of water. Biochemical reactions happen with, and in, the buffered medium of water, which also stores heat, keeps the body cool, and keeps molecules together with surface tension, among many other life-supporting properties. All organisms require water, and seek to obtain and retain it. This is a daunting challenge in the desert.

Desert rain occurs too seldom for individuals to rely on, so, if they cannot collect fog or dew, nor dig deep down to groundwater, they need to find pools or springs. For most birds and mammals, dragonflies and other water-specialising creepy-crawlies, such waterholes are crucial for survival. It requires all kinds of ingenuity for these animals to find water, either by smell, memory, or by watching each other. Only a few live at or in the water and most need to roam across the dry desert in search of food and to retreat from predators. But as they also need to drink, the location of waterholes often defines the patterns of movement and distribution of species across the desert landscape.

Natural waterholes are few and far-between across the Namib. There are none in the dune fields, and only a few isolated brackish seeps across the gravel plains, though some well-kept secret ones, kept open by digging gemsbok, are of surprisingly good quality. The rocky terrain of isolated mountains, the so-called inselbergs such as Brandberg, Spitzkoppe, Rössingberg, Langer Heinrich Mountain and many other smaller ones, often collect rainwater in crevices from which it slowly feeds isolated pools in deep ravines. These are difficult to get at for all but birds. But need spurs ingenuity, and one can be amazed at the different paw- and hoof-prints one can see at these seemingly inaccessible pools. However, the best and most reliable waterholes are scattered in the shaded canyons of larger riverbeds, such as the Kuiseb, Swakop and Ugab Rivers. These waterholes are filled, provided the river had flooded during the past season. If not, then animals such as elephant and zebra need to revert to the most experienced veterans of the previous drought to show the rest where to find the precious wet.

On behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, a team of scientists from Namibia and abroad – led by Fauna & Flora International - is currently collating available information on water sources across the Central Namib so as to better understand the spatial distribution of the resources on which so many animals depend. While one may wonder whether this study will lift the veil of mystery off the Little Prince's Secret, Zophosis moralesi realises that the best way to protect a secret is to know where not to intrude.

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