

Toktok Talkie

by Joh Henschel



Jackal is our Friend

“Jakkals is ons vriend”. Ouma Lydia Swartbooi, wizened respected elder of the Topnaar Community living in Armstraat along the Kuiseb River, shared her knowledge with the assembled audience of community members and scientists. Jackals provide !nara seeds legs so this plant can disperse and recruit. And jackals play many more such important roles in the environment, she elaborated. Sadly, Ouma Lydia passed away last year, but her wisdom endures.

As every Namib toktokkie knows, jackals may not at first appear to be everybody’s friend. Indeed, toktokkies have reasons to fear jackals, although, luckily the average beetle only has a slim chance of falling prey to one as long as there are juicier meals around. As classic omnivores, jackals cope well in the desert, and indeed in many different environments all over southern and eastern Africa. They can figure out how to overcome many different kinds of really tough problems, which is probably where their reputation for cunningness comes from. This ensures them a special place in folklore.

Even more endearing is that family life is at the heart of jackal society. Jackals live in pairs, bonding for life and are completely faithful to each other. A pair works very hard for a living, cooperatively feeding and protecting their young, often with the help of older offspring. They have to be crafty and shrewd in their ways, and thrifty with their time and energy, as feeding the family is often difficult, and they have to overcome many hurdles, including competition from other jackals. Territories are clearly staked out and diligently advertised and defended, but passage across territories is granted as long as commuters don’t stray from paths and pay due respect to residents.

People make life both easy and grim for jackals, on the one hand unknowingly “providing” easy food in the form of livestock and garbage, on the other hand persecuting jackals with a vengeance, including poisoning. To add insult to injury, even where jackals don’t conflict with people’s interests, they are still wantonly killed. Witness the recent carnage of jackals along our coastal roads. With every jackal killed, a stable family group is disrupted. If many families collapse, the breeding system becomes chaotic and unstable, and although health drops, jackals somehow overcome losses by propagating.

We are fortunate to have jackals at the Namib coast, famously at Cape Cross. They even breed along the Walvis Bay lagoon. Jackals patrol vast areas to diligently clean up anything dead, garnishing titbits with plant matter and insects. When hunting, they tend to go for the weakest. By carrying food and defecating, they bring nutrients inland from the ocean shore, thus stimulating productivity in the desert. Jackals are part of the checks and balances of nature, pillars of a viable Namib environment.

The melodious howls of jackals are among the most characteristic sounds of the African night, a reassurance that things are well. Even *Zophosis moralesi* agrees with Ouma Lydia, let’s look after our friends, the jackals.

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