

treasure islands: Renosterveld remnants of the Overberg

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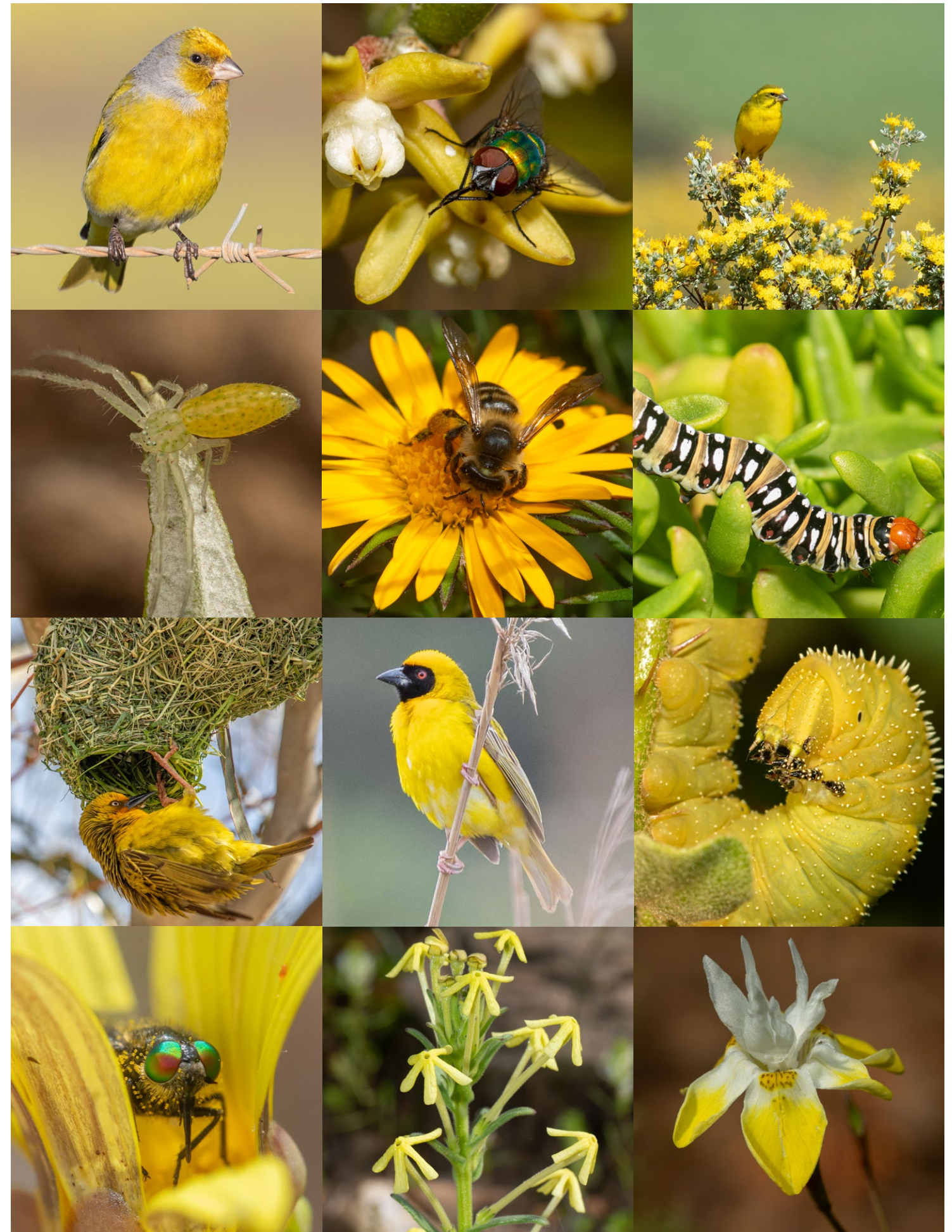
Fields of vygies in the
Eastern Overberg along
the Breede River

For most who are familiar with it, the mention of ‘Overberg’ conjures up images of gently undulating hills of bright yellow canola and dreamy seas of green-blue wheat and barley fields, dotted with peacefully grazing cattle and sheep and flocks of our national bird, the Blue Crane. However, these extensive plains are in fact a mere shadow of their former selves, which were once teeming with different life and far more extraordinary biodiversity.

 Picture this: A vast landscape of gently rolling hills interspersed with wetlands, streams and flowing rivers, with grassy slopes packed with an inordinate number of flowering plants. Add to this imaginary world a plethora of life: from bulky black rhino to graceful antelope such as bontebok and bluebuck, fearsome predators including lion and leopard, the background music a cacophony of bird- and frog-song, while graceful raptors forage over this rich landscape. Abundance. These renosterveld landscapes must have been a paradise to any early explorer-naturalist who witnessed this immense diversity on their first visit to the inland-lowlands of the Cape. After being utterly astonished by the brilliance of the coastal and montane fynbos habitats with their crazy abundance of showy proteas and ericas, the transition into the clay-based lowlands, with their completely different floral composition that supported an abundance of large animals, must have been quite a spectacle. Unfortunately, as awe-inspiring as this must

have been, the mission of the early colonialists was to conquer and rule, thus obliterating all that stood in their way of making a home in this unpredictable and seemingly hostile environment. It wasn't long after laying claim to the Cape that the settlers shot out most of the large herbivores and predators from the landscape, resulting in multiple extinctions of varying degree: the total extinction of the bluebuck, the local extinction of many species including charismatic species like black rhino, serval, and Cape lion, as well as the near-extinction of the endemic bontebok. Once the competitors and predators had been removed from the system, it was deemed ‘safe’ to bring in livestock, thus the abundant herds were replaced by a couple of highly selective feeders, in the form of sheep and cattle. No longer was the veld managed by a diversity of big and small, browsing and grazing animals, which kept the system balanced and shaped it in a way that benefited all life. Instead, the new and fussy feeders ate only the most palatable (edible) grasses and shrubs, in all likelihood altering the vegetation structure from what it was originally, as there was nobody left to graze, browse or trample the plants avoided by livestock. This is very likely to have changed the appearance of the system from a mosaic of grassy shrublands to one generally dominated by a handful of ‘unwanted’ plants (such as ‘renosterbos’), giving the veld an overall dull and homogenous appearance. Millions of years of evolution were altered within a very short window of time.

Over the last 50–100 years, things for renosterveld only got worse. With the increasing human desire to grow food and the advent of the plough, these rangelands were further altered – this time, irreversibly,



Top row: Cape Canary, Geenbottle fly (*Neomyia* sp.) on Caustic Vine (*Cynanchum viminalis*), Yellow Canary
 Second row: Green Grass Crab Spider (*Oxytate* sp.), Mining Bee (*Andrena* sp.), Suring Moth (*Klugeana philoxalis*)
 Third row: Cape Weaver, Masked Weaver, Death's Head Hawkmoth (*Acherontia atropos*)
 Bottom row: Deer Fly (*Rhigioglossa* sp.), *Lyperia tristis*, *Moraea gawleri*



and at a scale so significant that almost every bit of this habitat was eradicated, in favour of extensive fields of monoculture croplands. Small remnants of renosterveld now hang onto steep slopes, the edges of watercourses and rocky hilltops – all areas the plough was unable to reach. Despite the fact that these islands are all that remain (5% is the estimate remaining), they miraculously still house some of the greatest plant diversity on the planet; treasure troves of extraordinary gems hanging onto existence and providing refugia for a plethora of species that have managed to adjust to living in a this ‘new’ landscape.

The not-so-sexy name ‘renosterveld’ translates directly into ‘rhino fields’ and was given to the vegetation by early settlers, most likely because this was where one was likely to encounter rhino. Some say the name originates from the overall colour of the veld resembling the grey colour of a rhino’s hide, but this is contrary to other anecdotal evidence that suggests that these areas were not always grey, but were in fact more golden and grassy (still evident in remnants today) and that the grey colour typical of today’s renosterveld is the product of the dominance of renosterbos, a grey shrub that thrives in poorly managed or overgrazed veld. We will never really know, but it doesn’t matter: what remains is extraordinary and unique; an entire ecosystem teetering on the brink of extinction.

What makes the situation more complex is that essentially all remnants occur on privately owned land, and that nearly 14% of the >1,200 plant species recorded in the Overberg’s renosterveld to date are threatened (red-listed). The levels of endemism are also exceptional: several plants are restricted to less than a handful of sites. Others might have a slightly wider

distribution (e.g. occurring between Bredasdorp and Riversdale), but are restricted to particular microhabitats, such as saline watercourses or quartz outcrops. Diversity within a small area can also be exceptional: we have recorded as many as 50 species within a 1m² quadrat in renosterveld in the Overberg, putting renosterveld at the top of the charts among Mediterranean shrublands. And still, despite the fact that just 5% remains, we are continually discovering species previously unknown to science: at least 10 ‘new’ plant species were only ‘discovered’ in the last 13 years. However, the diversity of life encountered in renosterveld is not restricted to the plants. We are constantly in awe of how the larger, specialised mammals such as the termite specialists – aardwolf and aardvark – are still present in the larger remnants. An important flagship for renosterveld is the Black Harrier, a ground-nesting raptor and South Africa’s third most endangered endemic bird, which has a key breeding stronghold in renosterveld remnants in the eastern Overberg. And then, of course, there are the tiny and often most important critters: the insects (so many of whom are specialised pollinators) – their diversity is equally impressive to that of the plants.

Thus, the easily overlooked, deceptively ‘drab’ patches of renosterveld that lie among the croplands of the Swartland and Overberg are in fact rich treasure troves of biodiversity in dire need of conservation and, often, active management to keep them healthy and intact. In the Overberg, an NPO, the Overberg Renosterveld Trust (ORT), dedicated solely to the long-term protection of these special refugia, works closely with those who hold its future in their hands: the landowners. This is no easy feat, with

Top row: *Aloe ferox*, *Hermannia* species (known as ‘Doll’s Roses’), Cape Amber Baboon Spider
Second row: Monkey Beetle visiting Buchu, Fume Speckled Ermine Moth (*Yponomeuta fumigatus*), African Hoopoe
Third row: Southern Red Bishop, *Hyobanche* species, a parasitic plant, Flesh or Satellite Fly in the Sarcophagidae family
Bottom row: *Gladiolus teretifolius*, Copper Opal (*Chrysoritis thysbe*), Cape Lappet Moth (*Eutricha capensis*)

attitudes towards this *uitvalgrond* (directly translated into ‘wasteland’), as it is commonly known, varying significantly: from love to hate and everything in between.

In its nearly 13 years of existence, the ORT has secured over 1,000ha of land through direct purchase, in partnership with other key NGOs including WWF-SA, the World Land Trust and the IUCN Netherlands, while also securing more than 4,600 additional hectares for conservation in perpetuity through partnerships with dedicated, committed landowners, using the conservation easement or servitude mechanism. These partnerships are based on voluntary agreements between the landowners and the ORT and are registered on the property’s title deeds. As an incentive for this long-term commitment, the ORT makes use of generous donor funding to assist signed-up landowners with managing their veld (so that conserving doesn’t cost the farmer), the initial costs of which can be relatively high if alien clearing, fencing, or ecological burning are required to kick-start the restoration process. The process of securing these ‘easements’ is entirely dependent on the relationships and the trust that is nurtured with landowners – this takes time, and many chats over coffee, to build, but this relationship is key to the future of renosterveld. Why? Because it typically results in a total mind-shift by previously weary or unconvinced landowners. The most rewarding feedback that we receive is along the lines of: ‘I didn’t know what I had before. Now I see value in these special pieces of renosterveld.’ And that value does not imply monetary value – it implies a sense of wonder and appreciation, fostering the realisation that they, the farmers, are the custodians of what is left and thus a desire to protect and safeguard the future of

renosterveld.

But what is it about renosterveld that makes it so special and not ‘so what if we lose what is left of it?’, as some might ask? Well, our natural ecosystems are what hold our landscapes together. The rivers and natural remnants regulate water flow and mitigate flooding and drought periods. They are the fabric of life that runs through our farmlands, and are connected to our coastal reserves and wetlands, which in turn run into the oceans and support our marine ecosystems. The delicate thread of life is a continuum. The renosterveld islands maintain extraordinary levels of biodiversity; losing these ecosystems will equate to losing scores of individual species. They provide sanctuaries for so many creatures, including critical pollinators, which would be lost from our landscapes forever without these refugia.

Globally, over 190 countries have committed to the 30x30 conservation target: that by 2030, 30% of the world’s natural habitats will be preserved – an ambitious goal that speaks to the global mind-shift towards valuing biodiversity. Finally, the world is waking up to the compelling truth: that without the earth’s riches, our lives are poorer.



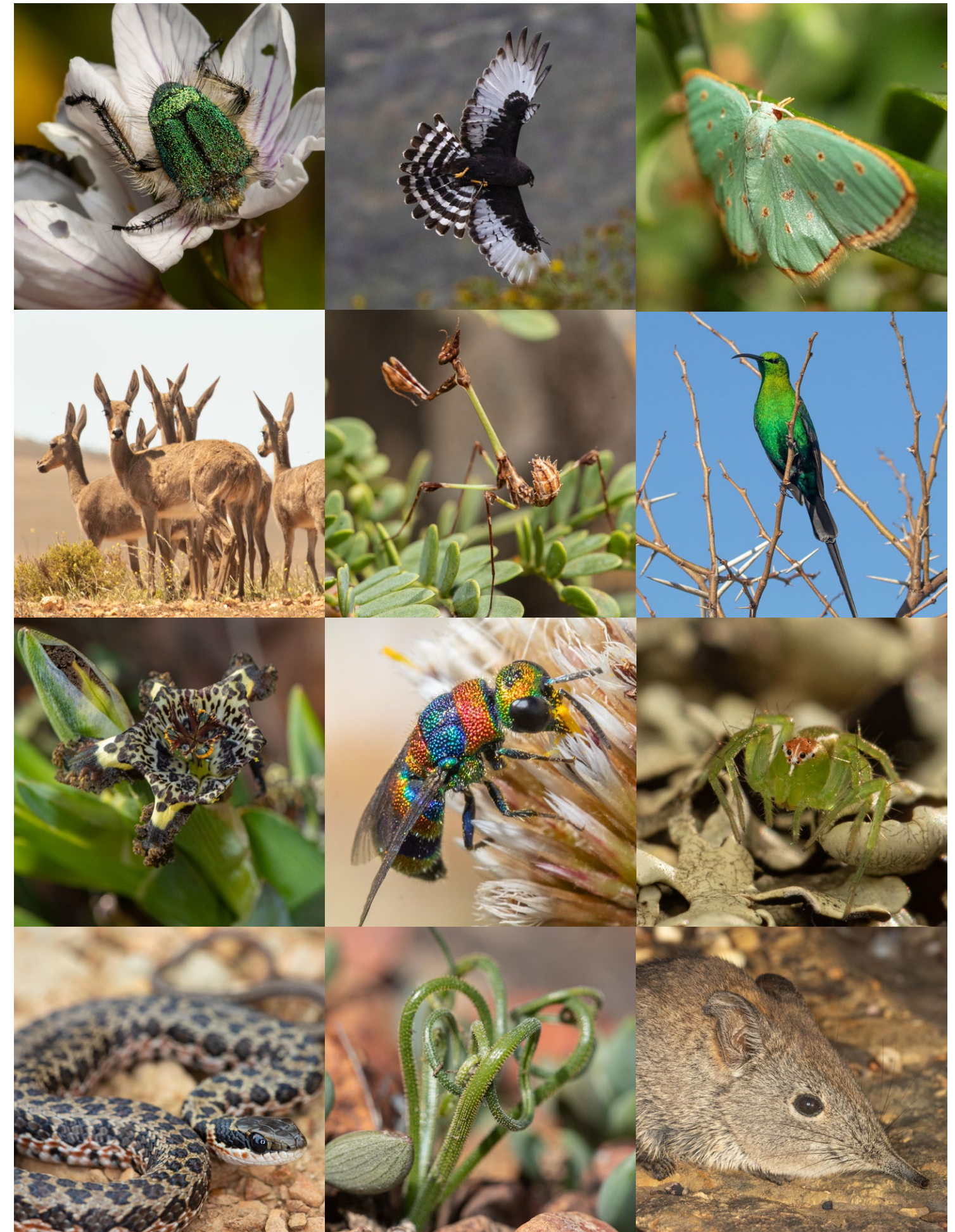
Renosterveld Field Guide app on Apple App Store



Renosterveld Field Guide app on Google Play



Overberg Renosterveld Trust website



**Top row: Monkey Beetle pollinating *Isia flexuosa*, endangered Black Harrier, Pink-laced Emerald (*Comostolopsis Stillata*)
**Second row: Grey (Vaal) Rhebuck, Giant Conehead Mantis (*Hemimpusa capensis*), Malachite Sunbird (male)
**Third row: *Ferraria crispa*, Rainbow Cuckoo Wasp (*Chrysis mionii*), Lynx Spider (*Oxyopes sp.*)
Bottom row: Rhombic Skaapsteker, *Albuca spiralis*, Cape Rock Elephant Shrew******