

ADVOCATING SCIENCE-LED MAMMAL CONSERVATION

Mammal NEWS

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Review

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SASOL plant and vleai grassland. Photograph by Mark Hows



Serval. Photograph by Mark Hows

SASOL Servals, a South African Success Story

Mark Hows, mark@hows.org.uk

The SASOL Synfuels plant in Secunda is a far cry from the usual wildlife holiday destinations of Kruger National Park. The mega Synfuels plant, the largest of its kind in the world, includes one of Africa's tallest structures which can be seen for several miles; a real industrial blot on the landscape. The plant employs 21,000 people producing 160,000 barrels per day of synthetic fuel from the liquefaction of coal. But there is a silver lining – a large 8,000 hectare buffer zone surrounds the plant and is one of the largest areas of high veld grassland remaining in South Africa.

This large area of grassland, along with streams and areas of reed-beds within the fenced plant perimeter, is protected by a large security team which keeps the public out, preventing disturbance. The fencing also keeps mid- and large-sized predators out and this lack of competition and predation has allowed the serval population to flourish. This protected area at SASOL has the highest density of servals in the world, with nearly 100 per 1002 km, which is almost three times the density of the second highest density in Tanzania's Ngorogoro crater.

The presence of the elusive serval at SASOL Secunda was featured on BBC's *Big Cats* programme a couple of years back and was the main reason I was interested in spending some time in this less than classic wildlife holiday destination during my stay in South Africa.

I contacted Daan Loock, the head of biodiversity for SASOL at Secunda, about the serval project and was invited to come for a tour to see this rare habitat, the site and of course to look for servals. This was arranged for the first day of our holiday. One of Daan's team collected us from our nearby hotel before visiting the biodiversity team office to discover more about the project and the ongoing research before our serval search.

We passed an area where white rhino have been introduced along with Bleesbok, ostrich and plains zebra and we saw all these species as we passed into the heart of the grassland. Here we spent three hours driving round the extensive grassland. We quickly spotted a vleai rat (*Otomys irroratus*), the favourite prey of the serval. We also saw a marsh mongoose, several Cape porcupines and common duikers; these small deer are similar in size to a serval and caused a few false alarms when we glimpsed them hiding in the long grass. Eventually we did find a serval walking on a track and we had a nice but brief view before it disappeared into the dense grass not to be seen again. During our trip we were always in the shadow of heavy industry, despite this, the numbers of animals seen on our trip was impressive.

Many thanks to Daan and his team for hosting our visit to see this amazing conservation success albeit in a most unusual setting.



Serval. Photograph by Daan Loock



Serval. Photograph by Daan Loock