

Safe haven for the creepy crawlies

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Namaqua National Park is a favourite destination of flower enthusiasts for testing their knowledge of the colourful blooms. But not much is known about the creeping, crawling arachnids that seek shelter in this diverse habitat. Through collecting samples of different arachnid species, para-ecologist Reginald Christiaan is on a mission to learn more about the distribution and habitat preferences of spider and scorpion species in the park.

Through funding from the South African National Biodiversity Institute (Sanbi), Christiaan is gathering information on the diversity of eight-legged invertebrates, including spiders and scorpions.

While the conditions of Namaqua are often harsh – especially during the hot summer months – arachnids that find a haven here are well adapted to survive. But no one has ever embarked on research regarding their distribution and habitat preferences within the park.

“The general lack of knowledge of arachnid diversity in the Northern Cape and the Succulent Karoo make this survey very important,” says Christiaan, who is from Namaqua’s neighbouring community, Soebatsfontein. This research will inform conservation planning and management in the park.

So far, Christiaan has already recorded 21 spider families represented by 60 species alone, and other very rare ones. Two species recorded were previously only thought to be found in Namibia. One of these, the *Hottentotta arenaceus*, is a pale orange-yellow scorpion that is found in the coastal section in the park. Another species sampled, *Asemesthis affinis* Lessert 1933 (*Gnaphosidae*), is a ground spider, previously only thought to be found in Angola. *Xysticus cribratus* Simon, 1885 (*Thomisidae*), which is found from the Mediterranean to Korea and



Zodariidae psammorygma.



Arachnids such as *Cyrtachenidae ancylotrypa* have found a safe haven in Namaqua.

Sudan was also recorded here. Three more species identified may be new discoveries, and are yet to be studied in order for certain identification to take place.

Searching for these creatures is no easy feat. Christiaan and co-workers look under rocks and rustle bushes to gather samples, and use ultraviolet light

at night to search for scorpions. These samples are then sent to the National Collection of Arachnida at the ARC-Plant Protection Research Institute in Pretoria, where final identification is made.

This research will form part of the South African National Survey of Arachnida data set and will provide valuable information on the distribution of species to be used in compiling the first Red Data List for arachnids.



Photo: Reginald Christiaan

Assistant Gerald Christiaan and ranger Sheldon Matthys assist in the search for arachnids.