Fauna

Gladiator also at the Canyon

Insects, also discovered in the northern parts of Gondwana Cañon Park, caused worldwide headlines four years ago. Why? For the first time since 1915 a whole new insect order had to be established for the unexpected find.

The predatory insect, nicknamed 'Gladiator', is between 2 and 4 cm long and resembles a young praying mantis. In contrast to the praying mantis, however, the gladiator grabs his prey with his front and middle pairs of legs. Three specimens were unexpectedly found at Augurabis, in the northern reaches of Gondwana Cañon Park – by students and scientists on an expedition arranged by the EduVentures initiative (see report p. 18).

The first live Gladiator was discovered in 2002 on Brandberg Mountain in north-western Namibia. Experts felt that this was about as sensational as if a mammoth had been spotted alive.

The original discovery of the Gladiator insects turned into a piece of detective work: At the Max Planck Institute for Fresh Water Research in Plön, Germany, Ph.D. student Oliver Zompro is busy examining a fossil insect trapped in a drop of amber which is 45 million years old. He concludes that the insect cannot be classed with any of the known categories. At the Museum of Natural History in Berlin he comes across a specimen which appears to be related to his object of research and which had been collected in the German colony of South West Africa in 1909. Reason enough for the exciting assumption that an insect, which during the past 45 million years became extinct in Europe, had possibly survived in Africa.

An enquiry at the National Museum in Namibia is answered in the affirmative: indeed they have a similar insect found during a recent survey of the Brandberg Mountain in north-west Namibia, and another specimen was now again brought

It set the ball rolling: an ancient specimen of the predatory 'Gladiator' insect trapped in amber.

A 'Gladiator' insect in typical surroundings at the Fish River Canyon. Photo: EduVentures.

to the museum just a few days ago by Namibian biology student Martin Wittneben. This unfamiliar looking creature walked into his camp on the Brandberg. Thus Zompro is able to find several live Gladiator specimens on an excursion in March 2002.

After in-depth research it can firmly be stated that this insect does not belong to any known genus, family or order. The last time this happened was in 1915. Thus a new order is added to the 30 known ones – the Gladiator (also dubbed Heelwalker) or Mantophasmatodea. The Latin name is made up from that of the praying mantis (Mantodea) and the stick insect (Phasmatodea).

Since then 13 gladiator species have been found in different parts of southern Africa. They form 10 genera and 3 families. So far it was not known, however, that gladiators can be found at the Fish River Canyon as well. What is more, they might be specimens of yet another new species. The three most recent gladiators collected at the canyon are still being studied.

Environmental Education

By collecting samples children learn about nature's diversity

The name is a fine understatement: the 'EduVentures' initiative is about much more than education and adventure. For the last three years scientists and teachers have organised expeditions (run through the National Museum of Namibia) to remote areas in Namibia for school children from different walks of life. Under the experts' guidance the children collect biological material for the major scientific collections in the country. With great success: in September 2005 they gathered 2,000 plant and animal samples on excursions in southern Namibia. Near Klein-Aus Vista (Aus) they came upon spiders that were not known to exist in Namibia, and in Gondwana Cañon Park they collected at least two other most likely new species of spiders. Also in the park they found a 'Gladiator', a group of insects that was only recently discovered (see p. 14).

During the expeditions the children literally get to 'grasp' nature's diversity and worth. They also learn to help one another, to use water sparingly and to cope with physical exertion. And they get to know their own country; especially for children from disadvantaged families these excursions are often the first 'adventure holiday' of their life.

The programme was started in 2003 by Tharina Bird (arachnologist at the National Museum) and the late Nicholas Krone, then a teacher at Immanuel Shifidi High School. Three expeditions and several weekend excursions are arranged every year. The initiative relies on the support of sponsors. For more see www.eduventures-africa.org

Children collect biological material at the canyon.