

# CLOWNS OF THE VELD

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*"... when alarmed they snort at first and then race off together for a little way, then wheel round like a squadron of cavalry at a given signal, facing the cause of their alarm ... During these alarm and curiosity antics, the animals toss their heads, switch their tails and prance or gambol in an amusing manner."*

Roberts 1951

The above quotation refers to the provincial mammal of the Orange Free State, which oddly features prominently on the coat-of-arms of Natal. These animals only moved into parts of Natal during the winter months in search of better grazing and at the time (c. 1870) when a new coat-of-arms was designed, they were the animals most typical (*sic.*) of Natal and also because they had been one of the main export goods (see below) of the young colony. This



Coat-of-arms of the Cape Province (above), Natal (right above) and Bloemfontein City (right below).

mammal also forms the right supporter of the coat-of-arms of the Cape Province and the left supporter of the arms of Bloemfontein City.

Formerly they ranged in hundreds of thousands throughout the Orange Free State, central, northern and north-eastern parts of the Cape Province and the southern parts of the Transvaal. Then came the pioneers, "hunters" and rinderpest.

On the 24th August 1860 "The Greatest Hunt in History" took place just outside the present day Bloemfontein on the farm Bainsvlei. Prince Alfred, second son of Queen Victoria and his hunting party, it is alleged, reduced the number of game on that day by about five thousand head. In 1866 alone one firm in Kroonstad is said to have exported 157 000 wildebeest and Blesbok skins. In 1870 and 1871 nearly half a million skins were shipped from Durban. The eastern Orange Free State where most of this slaughter took place, still has the ominous name of "Riemland".

By 1900 **Black wildebeest** numbers had dwindled to about 600 animals in the Orange Free State and southern Transvaal, while in the Cape Province the species was already exterminated. Had it not been for a number of interested farmers in the Orange Free State and southern Transvaal, the Black wildebeest would surely have been extinct by now. In 1965 a survey accounted for 1 800 animals and a survey undertaken during 1968 - 1970 revealed 3 100 animals. Therefore through the efforts of nature conservation agencies and farmers, the species is no longer endangered. In fact today surplus stocks are made available for introduction, re-introduction and even hunting.

So next time you see a clown of the veld, ponder on the fate of other vulnerable species — for man (and disease) nearly exterminated, but man can also save.



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*Clown of the veld, a Black wildebeest.*

In 1852, Captain William Cornwallis Harris wrote "... for the first time, we saw large troops of these eccentric animals ... Of all the quadrupeds, ... (it) is probably the most awkward and grotesque: Nature doubtless formed him in one of her freaks, and it is scarcely possible to contemplate his ungainly figure without laughter. Wheeling and prancing in every direction, his shaggy and bearded head arched between his slender and muscular legs, and his long white tail streaming in the wind, this ever-wary animal has at once a ferocious and ludicrous appearance. Suddenly stopping, shewing an imposing front, and tossing his head in mock defiance, his wild red sinister eyes flash fire, and his snort, resembling the roar of a lion, is repeated with energy and effect. Then lashing his sides with his floating tail, he plunges, bounds, kicks up his heels with a fantastic flourish, and in a moment is off at speed, making the dust fly behind him as he sweeps across the plain."