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update



Introduction

It has been a very warm summer indeed. Records from the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) show that this summer has been the hottest on record for the past 30 years! November 2018 was the second driest November on record for the previous nine years, with only 57mm falling. The wettest November was in 2010 when 274mm fell! Thankfully, January brought about much needed rain and respite from the heat. 244mm fell in January, which is the second highest received in January for the past nine years. The highest was in January 2012 when 453mm fell. A truly topsy-turvy rainy season! Overall we have received 539mm to date this rainy season and we still have a few months to go. It will be interesting to see if we get close to the overall average of 907mm.

Frequently heard comments from members attest to the veld revival and beauty of the estate. The previous couple of Jimmy's monthly blogs have illuminated this fact. Jimmy's blogs are filled with informative text and stunning photos that show the secret lives and habits of the local fauna and flora.

Work by the field team this summer has been centered on consolidating and protecting what was achieved in August 2018 with the special projects. There are more details on this topic in the section under River works as well as information on what to expect within the next few months.

As summer starts to draw to a close, one can start to feel a slight chill in the early mornings, a reminder that autumn is around the corner.

We look forward to seeing you at Finsbury soon.

Don, Anne & Rose MacCrimmon

River works

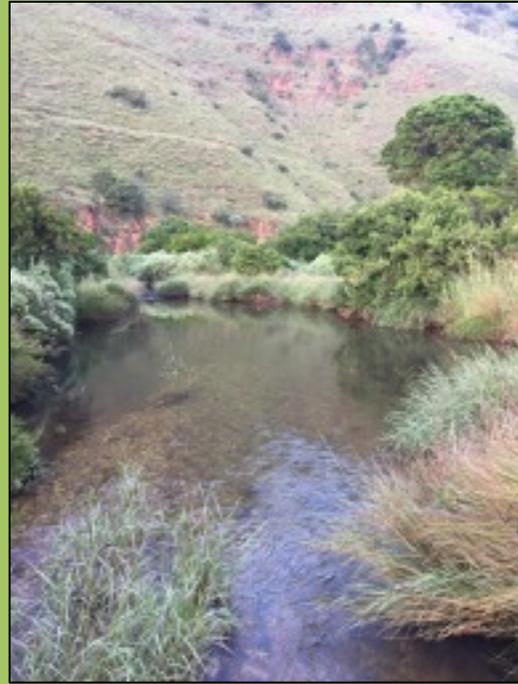
K33

It is amazing to see how this old dam is redeveloping. Plant growth around the edge of the dam has taken place at a phenomenal rate and is quite prolific in places. The island looks as though it had never been disturbed in the first place, as the grass is so established. Along with the indigenous plants that have grown, there are also the bad ones. The thorny apple otherwise known as the stinkblaar has also germinated prolifically. Jimmy and his team have visited the dam on two occasions recently to remove these unwanted plants. As mentioned in the previous newsletter, the team was going to fill gabion mattresses with rocks over the new emergency spillway. The scope of this work meant that it extended from spring well into summer. The result is that there is now an adequately protected emergency spillway in the event of a major flood. The same type of rock filled mattress spillway has also been placed over the coffer dam upstream of K33. It was observed that the coffer dam serves a useful purpose as a silt trap for K33. The new channel that was dug to service the old spillway has also received some attention. Due to the walls of the channel being upright, it was observed that when the water level picked up during heavy rainfall events the bottom section would be eroded away which then led to the upper section being top heavy and thus collapsing. The walls have therefore been cut back to an angle to prevent this from happening. A protective soil saving cover has been placed over the bank now to protect the soil cover and give cover to germinating plants. Within a few seasons this channel will look like a natural stream. At the time of writing, work on planting up the borrow pit of K33 was commencing. The water level in the dam is at a point where it extends across and into the borrow pit of K33. This has created a roughly 30m² area that is inundated with water at an average depth of 1 foot. This is a perfect area to now have a wetland with water loving plants that will attract both insect and bird life. Once this wetland is established with mainly sedges and flute willows it will also serve as a good screen for the borrow pit. Below are two photographs of the dam. The photo on the left was taken shortly after the wall was repaired and the photo on the right was taken in February. With the prolific plant growth there will also be a surge in the insect population. This presents us with a very good opportunity for fish to grow out to large sizes with the natural foods that are available. The dam is going to be heavily stocked, but it will be out of bounds until spring in order to give the fish the opportunity to grow. This advice comes from an experienced fly fisherman who has seen this type of growth in fish at other venues with newly flooded dams.



W1

A small river project that was completed last year has now yielded significant results during the rainy season. A loosely packed rock weir was constructed in the Whisky River below the Shark tank. The weir was built for two purposes, both of which have worked. The first was to create a good holding pool for fish and the second was to divert the Whisky River back into its original course. By diverting the river back into its old course we have observed an incredible result at the confluence of the Whisky and Kliprots rivers. The confluence, otherwise known as SPK13 has been scoured out naturally by the Whisky River, which has resulted in a deeper pool with a beautiful clean pebble bed. The photo on the left below is the new W1 where there is a deep pool in the foreground and the photo on the right is SPK13, where natural scouring of the river bed has taken place.



What this rainy season means for future river work.

As always the amount of rainfall and how it falls dictates what our river program will be like for the dry season. Even though the veld has recovered well after the fire, the vegetative cover is still at a point where there is a lot of soil runoff during heavy storms. The Kliprots River in particular gets very discoloured after big rainfall events. While the Whisky River along with the Steenkamps and Majubane rivers do go off colour, they have shown that they clear up quickly. This observation means that our focus with the sludge pump this year will have to be on the Kliprots River, as this is where most of the silt is been deposited. Working on the theme of consolidation and protection, the team will also conduct rock clearing out of S10. This is the large weir in the Steenkamps that received much needed work last year August. The Steenkamps River by its very nature is subject to quick flash floods, which can move large amounts of rock and silt. One flash flood in early December did this and moved some rock into the newly refurbished dam. It is not a large amount of rock and our team with equipment will clean it out again during the dry season.

Reeds

After our initial spray last year it is very encouraging to see how well the herbicide worked. There has been regrowth, but it covers a much smaller area than the original cover. The best period to follow up after the initial treatment is late summer/early autumn. Where necessary we will spray the herbicide but also experiment with cut stump treatment. Expert advice from a professional says that painting the herbicide onto a cut stump should be effective as well. If this is the case it is good news as it means that we will not have to worry about spray drift affecting other plants. Areas that will receive reed treatment this year include M3, M9, M27, K4, K9, K10, SPK8, SPK10 and SPK 12. The photos below show the significant results achieved from our spraying program last year. The top photos are M3 and the bottom is K4.



Trout update

At the recent AGM of the Mpumalanga Trout Association (MTA) we received feedback on the current situation of the legal battle of trout. The short end of the story is that nothing has changed since last year. Trout remain unlisted as an invasive species for the time being. However, all the organizations involved in the trout value chain are ready to challenge any step brought forward by the Department of Environmental Affairs. Finsbury remain a committed member to both FOSAF and MTA. Both organizations fall under the umbrella of Trout SA, which is coordinating the effort of keeping the trout value chain alive in South Africa.

Mount Anderson Catchment Nature Reserve update

The members of the reserve recently welcomed in Duncan Ballantyne as the new Chairperson of Mount Anderson Catchment Nature Reserve. Duncan has taken up the role after Doug Starling stepped down after many years in the position. Duncan is a member of Highland Run and has been coming into the valley regularly for the past 30 years. Duncan recently retired from Sappi and has also served as Chairman for LEFPA (Lowveld Escarpment Fire Protection Agency), which has the reputation in the Lowveld of been an extremely well run organization. The members of MANCR are all very excited for the expertise and knowledge that Duncan brings in.

The reserve is also undergoing a process of regularisation to current legislature. All the properties that fall within MACNR were gazetted as part of the reserve in 1994 but new laws require existing protected areas to re-register. This is a process that all protected areas have to undertake, even the Kruger National Park. MACNR has hired an environmental consultant who has begun to write up an environmental management plan for the reserve, a document that is vital in this whole process. A meeting has taken place with the relevant Mpumalanga conservation authorities (Mpumalanga Tourism Parks Agency) that have said that as we are not declaring a new reserve, only regularising, the signing off of the re-registration should take place without hindrance. It is a process that is likely to continue for several months, an update will be given with subsequent newsletters.

