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**Walking with baboons**

Baboons were present in the Cape Peninsula long before humans set foot on its turf. Unfortunately, due to increased urbanisation, their natural habitat is shrinking fast leading to increased confrontations between humans and these Chacma Baboons.

Already 'chased' off the Table Mountain range, about 250 baboons remain in the South Peninsula. They regularly invade villages to feed of easy access food, left by careless humans and have caused havoc in surrounding areas as well. Through no fault of their own they are now vilified and often shot or maimed by ignorant humans fed up with these annoying and sometimes dangerous characters. Signs urging people not to feed the baboons are regularly ignored and the future of these animals in the region is in doubt.

To counter the problem the Baboon Monitor Project was started in 1999. Using locals as monitors, the baboons are now chased away from villages in a humane and safe way. These monitors have developed a close relationship with the various troops and a mutual respect exists between the two sides.

Most people who encounter baboons in the peninsula feel threatened by them. Baboon Matters, the organization who manages the monitor project have now started a project which gives people the opportunity to enjoy these fascinating and lovable creatures in their natural habitat. The guides know and recognise these baboons and are accepted without fear, allowing them and other walkers to get close to these creatures and observe them without any threat.

I recently joined guide Sphielo for such a walk near Glencairn and within 20 minutes my perception of baboons had changed completely. Because they recognise Sphielo, they feel unthreatened by anyone accompanying him. No one takes food along so the baboons know better and do not harass you at all. In fact they just go about their business. The youngsters play like kids in the trees and river and the adults tend to the babies, rest in the trees and watch over proceedings. They also regularly mate with each other, a quick 10 second 'shag' for want of a better description, a few grunts and they move on. Sphielo told me the story of an elderly English couple who were offended by this behaviour and asked the guide if he could please stop the baboons doing that! Eish!

In fact their behaviour is very interesting and their social interaction fascinating to watch. One large baboon, who was lucky to escape with his life after been shot twice, was unrecognized by the troop when he returned because of his wounds. He now remains on the fringe of the troop until he heals and he feels it safe to return. The alpha male Goergie watches over all and calls the shots in this particular troop. I even saw his father, Eric, one of the 'legends' of these mountains. A chilled old dude with a 'been there done that' look about him.

With the number of remaining baboons in the region remaining constant, there are fears that one day; there won't be any left on the peninsula. This is an excellent opportunity to raise awareness and to generate a mutual respect between them and us (we are not as far apart as some might think). We are privileged to have these creatures still around and if everyone played their part, contact between us and them need not always be confrontational.

How to help:

- Never ever feed baboons and don't eat or carry obvious food if they are nearby.
- Do not confront them, if they grab your bag, let them take any food inside; chances are they will leave the bag once done. If you chase them they might disappear with your bag into the mountains.
- Don't provide easy access food if you live in an affected area. Make it as difficult as possible for them to feed from your house. Use baboon proof bins and burglar bars should leave gaps no larger than 8cm.
- Go walking with them with and a guide and gain a new perspective.

Check out [www.baboonmatters.org.za](http://www.baboonmatters.org.za) for more info