

TITLE: CREATURES OF THE NIGHT: AARDWOLF & Co

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As night falls in Goegap, the day starts for the creatures of the dark

The **Goegap Nature Reserve** with its area of 150 km² is located in the northern part of Namaqualand which is well-known especially for its splendour of wildflowers in spring. From the climatological point of view the region lies within a semi desert zone. This describes an intermediate of savannah and desert, in which the lack of rainfall and groundwater already has significant effect, i.e. water is a limited resource. The irregular and uncertain rain falls mainly in winter and is between only 80 up to a maximum of about 160 mm per year. Temperatures can rise up to 48°C in summer, but vary a lot within the course of the day as well as in the course of the year. The vegetation consists mainly of dwarf shrubs, woody plants and

succulents, which are especially adapted to this environment. For animals, an important and effective way of adaptation to life in this arid region is to be nocturnal. Being active during the night provides several advantages. At night the temperatures decrease. It is also important that during night the plants serving as food have a higher water content. Predators have to be nocturnal when their prey is nocturnal. In Goegap we have a total of 45 species of mammals, 25 reptile species, 3 amphibians and 94 bird species. Of those, a remarkable amount are nocturnal.



The armadillo is strictly nocturnal and solitary, feeding on ants and termites.

As an interesting nocturnal mammal one has to mention the timid **Aardvark** (*Orycteropus afer*) with its very catchy appearance. Most time of the day it spends in its self built burrow underground where it hides from the

heat of the day. However at night in search of food it can cover several kilometres. With its pig like snout close to the ground it tries to trace ant- and termite colonies which then are digged up with the big claws on the forefeet.

The **Aardwolf** (*Proteles cristatus*) also starts his search for termites at night and stays in his burrow underground most time of the day. Sometimes one can see this small hyaena species in the early hours of the morning or on late afternoons as well basking in the sun in front of its burrow. It often uses abandoned Armadillo-, Porcupine- or Hare burrows as a hiding place, which it sometimes enlarges. If no suitable burrows are available, the aardwolf is able to dig up its own new hole into the ground. In opposite to the Armadillo the Aardwolf does not dig up his prey, which is mainly harvester termites, but licks them up from the ground with his tongue.



An aardwolf, at night in front of its burrow, and in the morning basking in the first sun rays

A conspicuous nightly bright howling reveals the presence of the **Black backed Jackal** (*Canis mesomelas*), a doglike, middle-sized mammal with a characteristically black coloured back. Nevertheless the Black backed Jackal is particularly specialized on nocturnal behaviour only in areas where he feels disturbed by human presence, while he is also active during the day in undisturbed environments. The animal often occurs in pairs, but as well solitary or in family groups with up to ten individuals. They feed on

insects (for example grasshoppers or dragonflies) and hunt successfully for different species of smaller mammals. Seldom they capture young antelopes or in agriculturally used regions young sheep. As burrows they often uses left Armadillo holes or rock ledges. In more quiet regions, that are not disturbed by humans, the animal prefers exposed resting places, from which it can overview the surrounding area better.



If one can see a **Cape hare** (*Lepus capensis*) somewhere during the day it probably sits more or less motionless and nearly rigid in the cover of a small shrub closely ducked to the ground in a flat hollow that it digs up with its forefeet. As the color of its coat is well adjusted to the surrounding it serves for the animal as the only protection for not being captured by other animals during the day. At night this animal also gets active and with sunset starts its search for food which mainly consists of grass and other plants. When morning is breaking it again looks out for a hiding place for the following day.



The Cape hare is quite common in Goegap.

Many other mammals in Goegap are nocturnal, including many smaller ones like the two species of **elephant shrews** (fam.

Macroscelididae), the **Hairy footed Gerbil** (*Gerbillurus paeba*) or the different species of **bats** present in this region.



Elephant shrews (top) and gerbils (right) are nocturnal. If you want to study them, you also have to be active at night (to right: P. Wiedman and C. Keller; top photos by G. Rathbun).



Likewise there are reptiles which only emerge from their hiding place when it is getting dark and use the night for hunting for food. This includes several species of snakes like for example the **Brown House Snake** (*Lamprophis fuliginosus*), which often- like its name already suggests- occurs

in the immediate vicinity of houses. But although it lives near to humans, during the day it is seen seldom, because the animal hides very well, for example in compost heaps, tool sheds and the like. Its food mainly consists of small mammals.



The house snake (left) and the tiger snake (right) are common in Goegap. While the house snake is generally common, the tiger snake is an endangered species.

During the day the **Namib Tiger Snake** (*Telescopus beetzi*) hides in ledges or also under the bark of trees. Then at night it sets for hunting, mainly for **geckos** (fam.

Gekkonidae). The species of geckos found in Goegap are like most geckos nocturnal. Also smaller rodents, bats and birds belong to the prey of the Namib Tiger Snake.



The **Coral Snake** (*Aspidelaps lubricus*) which spends the hours of daylight well protected in burrows underground or in rock gaps feeds very similar. It is related to cobras and poisonous. The bigger and heavily built **Puffadder** (*Bitis arietans*) may be observed during the day but is mainly

active during the night. The animal is not able to move very fast and therefore usually lies, well camouflaged by the colouring of its body, in the cover of darkness in wait for all sorts of prey like rodents, birds or other snakes as well.



The coral snake and puffadder (right) are poisonous.

As night falls, several species of birds start to wake up and begin hunting for prey. In Goegap one has to mention first and foremost the different species of owls and eagle owls that are found here. Often observed is the **Spotted Eagle Owl** (*Bubo africanus*). During daytime it rests near the ground, on cliffs or in trees and hunts with

the night coming up typically using telegraph poles or fence posts as a base. It mainly captures insects but also mice and birds. Because of its very similar appearance and behaviour this animal is often mistaken for the **Cape Eagle Owl** (*Bubo capensis*) which also occurs in the reserve but is more rare.



The spotted eagle owl can be spotted regularly in Goegap.

While nighttime might seem very quiet at first, for a lot of species it is the time to wake up and get active. The portrayed species just give a rough outline of the diversity of nocturnal species here. Many more interesting animals are to be discovered. That is why a close look into the night in the Goegap Nature Reserve is in any case an experience and absolutely worthwhile.



Morning has broken in Goegap: The creatures of the night disappear, while striped mice and striped mouse researchers become active.