

DASSIES WREAK HAVOC in Wembley gardens

Kayla Shaw

Rock hyraxes, also known as dassies, have been tunnelling through the suburb of Wembley, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake.

A resident who did not want to be named, said the Jack Russell-sized creatures have devastated her once-lush garden.

"Midway through last year, we noticed them. There must have been 20 to 30, all young. Now they're the size of my Jack Russells, which are too old to chase them away. They've destroyed all my shrubs and trees. After the rain and birds of prey, they disappeared, but now they're back.

You don't see them, but you can hear them," she

said.

She said her husband had spotted them in drains or sunning themselves on sports fields. Desperate for help, she turned to Ferncliffe Forest Wilding's Connor Cullinan.

Cullinan said relocating the dassies to the forest, where he and co-founder Janine Stephen could monitor them, would be beneficial.

"It's important to translocate rock hyrax from the suburbs because they belong in the wild. Dassies rarely forage beyond 50m from their colony site, so their impact would be minimal," Cullinan said.

"There were once four of five colonies in Ferncliffe but a disease decimated their numbers in the 1990s," he added.

"We want to rewild Ferncliffe. Right now, we focus on clearing invasive alien plants and restoring mist belt trees and understorey

plants. But we'd love to reintroduce locally extinct species. Apart from it being nice to have dassies, they're a crucial food source for predators like caracal and leopard," he said.

Cullinan said that in some areas, a caracal's diet consists mostly of dassies, while small mammals make up 20% of a leopard's diet. Evidence of caracal activity has been found in Ferncliffe, and Cullinan hopes leopards may follow.

"When there were resident dassies, crowned eagles nested at Ferncliffe. They no longer do, but we believe they may return if the dassies do," he said.

However, relocating dassies is not simple. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife animal specialist Brent Coverdale said their complex social structures make removal difficult.

"Capturing them requires removing entire family groups. Failure to do so disrupts social structures, leading to failed relocations or unintended consequences. Groups must be baited to ensure all members are caught.

Release sites also need preparation and predator monitoring.

These relocations

are complex, time-consuming, and resource-intensive," Coverdale said.

A permit is also required to capture and relocate dassies.

"No person may, without a permit, capture and release them elsewhere. With a permit, they can be relocated to unoccupied territories," he said.

Coverdale added that reports of dassie intrusions in residential areas have increased.

"They take refuge in homes, avoiding predators and finding easy food sources," he said.



A rock hyrax pup in the Ferncliffe Forest. Photo: Connor Cullinan