

RELOCATION OF AFRICAN ROCK PYTHON FAMILY IN HAWAAN FOREST ESTATE



A few years ago, in April 2018, my wife, Anne and I were involved with a remarkable encounter with nature, less than 500 metres from my home in Hawaan Forest Estate. I have been a wildlife photographer for over 20 years and visited countless wilderness regions across Africa, but this experience was both unique and different to what I have seen before in my travels! I had been asked by the estate's gardening team supervisor, the late Roy Toosen to help identify a number of young snakes that were seen sunning themselves next to a stormwater drain alongside one of our new residential roads, ironically named Python Place.

On arrival at the bushy site alongside a row of open stands, I was surprised to find that the numerous snakes that I saw around and entering in and out of a stormwater drain were young African rock pythons, with their distinctive coloured blotches and broad stripes on their dark bodies as well as triangular heads. Realizing that the female python was probably coiled up inside the drain protecting her offspring, I immediately phoned Jason Arnold, a friend and well-known snake catcher to bring his expert skills and experience to assist us with our challenging situation.

When Jason arrived and assessed the situation, he surmised that the female had most likely laid eggs inside the stormwater drain and from his inspections with a torch confirmed that he could see the large mass of a sizable snake curled up near the centre of the concrete pipe. His view was that she had most likely emerged from the forest to lay her eggs in the dark seclusion of the storm water drain and that we needed a plan to remove the female, catch the young pythons and relocate them back to their natural habitat within the fringes of the forest!

Jason asked us to bring a swimming pool pole which we bound with cloth at the one end and then we used two plastic bins which we wired together and cut an opening on one side to simulate a new den. This was taken and positioned in appropriate thick vegetation within the forest, past the grasslands, north of the nature reserve. We returned to the stormwater drain and over the next hour, Jason worked hard to draw out the huge female python as well as capture the young, slithering pythons in the adjacent bush. Using the pole from both sides of the stormwater drain, Jason eventually pushed and prodded the python to one side of the pipe and he was then able to grasp the neck of the snake with his snake tongs, seize it under its head and pull her clear of the opening, along with multiple young hatchling pythons, which came out with the female and were safely placed in material bags. The female African rock python was huge - estimated to be approximately 30 kgs in weight and over 4 metres long and altogether 15 of her offspring were captured during this process. There were also unfortunately a number of eggs that had been damaged due to heavy rain that occurred over the preceding days which would have flooded the drain during her occupation.

The snakes were then carried to the forest in the bags and released into their new den amongst the dense and shady vegetation. We were all extremely pleased that the relocation exercise involving one of the world's largest snakes had gone off pretty smoothly. From articles appearing in The Ridge Magazine and the Northglen News as well as social media postings, the relocation of the African rock pythons in Hawaan Forest Estate received great interest and was described as a "triumph in nature conservation."

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Relating Images

