

Kids find famous insect

Gladiator in the Fish River

Insects that made headlines all over the world four years ago when they were discovered on the Brandberg are also found at the Fish River Canyon!

This is one of the findings of the most recent EduVentures expedition to southern Namibia. Living specimens of this predatory insect, nicknamed gladiator, were first discovered in 2001 on the Brandberg mountain in north-western Namibia. According to experts



Anita Shoongeleni with both of her gladiator insects.

and Anita Shoongeleni (15) of Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School a pizza-prize for the gladiator find. EduVentures is an initiative within the National Museum of Namibia to gather valuable data and enthuse young people about nature.

Fifteen girls and boys from Windhoek and Katutura took part in the expedition from 20 August to 3 September. The first stop was Klein-Aus Vista (Gondwana Sperrgebiet Rand Park) west of Aus, where information about the lesser baboon spider was gathered for a science project done by spider expert Tharina Bird.

Three days later the group was hiking in the Augurabis area, the northern part of Gondwana Cañon Park at the Fish River Canyon. There, biologist Samanta Mapfumo and learner Anita Shoongeleni found three gladiator insects. They are between 2-4 cm long and resemble young praying mantises, but unlike mantises grab their prey with their front and middle pairs of legs. Since they could not be classed with any of the 30 known insect orders when they were discovered four years ago, a new order – the first one in

87 years – was established for them: Mantophasmatodea (Heelwalkers). Apart from this exciting find, the learners gathered about 2 000 plant and animal samples for the scientific collections of the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI) and the National Museum.

"I really enjoyed looking for scorpions," says Innocence Agostinho in sign language, smiling. "It was simply great holding the gladiator insect in my palm," recalls Karen Mutota (16, Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School), visibly enthralled. "I caught a grass snake and fed it to grasshoppers," adds Francis Bassingthwaighe, her eyes shining. All of them agree that the most difficult part was hiking with the backpacks, but after the first few days they became used to it.

The enthusiasm of the youngsters clearly proves EduVentures' success. The programme was started two years ago by Tharina Bird (arachnologist at the National Museum) and the late Nicholas Krone, then a teacher at Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School. Three expeditions and several weekend excursions are arranged every year. Selection of participants is strict.



Heavily loaded: Innocence Agostinho.



Francis Bassingthwaighe is not afraid of scorpions.

this was almost as sensational as finding a live mammoth on those lofty slopes. Until now it had not been known that the insects also occur at the Fish River Canyon. The ones found there could even be another new species.

Slides of the gladiator and the expedition were shown at the Habitat Research and Development Centre (HRDC) in Katutura on Friday evening, and EduVentures rewarded participants of the expedition for commitment and motivation during an award ceremony. Innocence Agostinho (14), a deaf and dumb learner at the Namibian Institute for Special Education (NISE), was awarded the merit award, Francis Bassingthwaighe (15) of St Paul's the best collector prize

The expedition would not be possible without donations and support. Main sponsors were the National Museum, the Global Environmental Fund (GEF), Rössing Foundation, Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF), and Gondwana Cañon Park. Valuable contributions were also made by Tré Supermarket, Plastiprint, and Klein-Aus Vista.

For further information:
EduVentures, (061) 27 6809,
info@eduventures-africa.org,
www.eduventures-africa.org.



The EduVentures team from l. to r. are Holger Vollbrecht, Benson Muramba, Tharina Bird, Jonas Kazondunge, Samanta Mapfumo and Patrick Rickert. Not present: Vera de Cauver and Telané Greyling.