

Raptor's View Wildlife Estate

Baboon/Primate Protocol

It is important that we all work together and in doing so we can drastically reduce home invasions by baboons and other primates.

Below are some of the important steps to follow in moving towards co-habiting.

1. Removing the Rewards

Food

- Outdoor dustbins need to be kept in baboon-proof cages or enclosures at all times, except for the moment when they're being emptied by RVHOA staff.
- RVHOA staff collects waste on a Thursday, and will take the waste out of the cage. The dustbins and bags must not be left on the roadside for collection.
- Residents on the estate who feed animals are providing a very powerful incentive for baboons to raid.
- This includes:
 - fruit and seed for birds,
 - food scraps for porcupines,
 - feeding genets,
 - bowls of pellets for domestic cats (breaking the no pets rule) and last but not least,
 - game pellets placed for game.
- Food must never be visible inside houses or on patios, including drinks in glass door fridges
- It is recommended that patio fridges and cupboards be caged and locked such as those in Kruger Park

2. Preventing access to the home

Residents must make every effort to prevent troops from accessing the inside of their homes, by locking up properly and not forgetting to close a door or window.

Mesh screens will not keep baboons out, as baboons can open windows and lift out sliding doors.

It is recommended that residents install some or all of the following:

- Double latches or bolts on doors and windows;
- Deadbolts on sliding doors and sliding windows;
- Ensure the sliding door rollers are correctly adjusted;
- Check the length of the screws holding wooden window latches in place, and replace with longer screws. Baboons have opened windows that have very short screws holding the latches.
- Fit outer rails for sliding doors to prevent the door from being pulled off the rails;
- Trellidor have a burglar proof gauze system, making openings reasonably baboon proof as well. Many lodges in the Timbavati are now using them. <https://trellidor.co.za/products/clear-guard/>
- Another burglar proof product is Clear View which can be placed over windows. It is a very strong, clear strip installed at intervals on a window. See link for example <https://www.clearviewss.co.za/gallery.html> This will work best on aluminium windows as the baboons may be able to force them off the wooden frames.
- A monitored security alarm system in the home will assist in getting someone there asap to minimise damage, should the baboons get in.

These measures need to be engaged whenever the house is unoccupied — even when dashing off for a quick trip to the shops.

3. Thatch and other primate toys

- Residents should secure their thatch roofs with a layer of wire mesh. This is highly effective in preventing the baboons from pulling out the grass.
- Valuable cushions, rugs and furniture on outdoor decks are like toys for baboons and can be damaged.

Additional reading

A Brief Natural History of Baboons which is important to know in order to understand troop dynamics and learning to live harmoniously with the primates around us - by Robyn Keene-Young

Troops are made up of females and young with a lower ratio of adult males.

Females form the core of the troop and never leave it. They're the repository for the troop's culture. They know the range, where to find food and when. The troop could be absent from a food source for several months and then suddenly return to it at the perfect moment: for example when a tree comes into fruit. This is the level of geographical memory and intelligence we're dealing with on Raptor's View.

Male baboons emigrate from their natal troop when they reach sexual maturity and try to join a new troop (this can take days, weeks or months). In agricultural and urban areas, these are often mistakenly labelled 'rogue' males, implying they've been kicked out of their troop for some reason, but there's no such thing. They're just dispersing males looking for a new troop – a perfectly normal fact of baboon life. These males will bring in any learned 'bad' behaviour from their natal troop with them.

Most adult males in our troops, at some point in their lives, would have immigrated from other troops in the area, or the neighbouring wildlife estates. They then become residents and adopt the culture of the troop they join.

The troop observes a strict social hierarchy. Males from the age of 5 outrank all females. And the males themselves have a dominance structure determined by displays of strength, with the strongest, fittest 'alpha' male at the top. The wahoo calls we hear each morning from the roosts are the males displaying their strength to each other, and determining their position in the rank. These ranks are very fluid and alpha males only enjoy a brief tenure at the top, before falling down the ranks and spending the rest of their days with female friends they have made, and any surviving offspring.

Typically, the alpha males dominate mating opportunities with the females. Since they can't hold their alpha position for very long, some males that suddenly rise in the ranks to alpha will kill suckling infants, in order to quickly bring the females back into oestrus and maximize their chance of passing on their genes (lions do the same thing). This can become a problem for the structure of the troop when wildlife managers arbitrarily shoot big male baboons, resulting in a high turnover of males.

Baboons experience a form of grief and elevated stress levels when a close relative or friend dies. It is not uncommon to see a female carrying a dead infant, grooming it and tending to its body as if it's still alive. She will even 'lost call' to the infant after she finally abandons the body.

Baboons are strictly diurnal, so residents need only be alert to baboon mischief during daylight hours. In fact, they will only descend from their roost when it's light enough for them to see quite clearly that there is no danger below.

Baboons have extraordinarily good eyesight, and this is their primary sense used in locating food or danger (their sense of smell is pretty much as limited as ours).

Why Do Baboons Raid?

Food

Baboons are intelligent, and highly adaptable to their environment. Once they've been rewarded with food, they don't unlearn the behaviour, or the source.

Residents who display food (even fake fruit), feed birds, porcupines and other animals, keep pets (with food bowls), or have unsecured refuse bins, are inviting baboons into their homes.

'Stealing' food from human houses is often the most effective way of foraging.

In the Cape, a single loaf of bread has the equivalent calorie intake of a full day's foraging in the fynbos.

Gnawing is also a natural habit, through which they have learnt that windows can be loosened. When windows are pulled and give way, baboons will take advantage and enter the house, occasionally being rewarded with a pantry or fridge full of high-calorie food.

After this happens a few times, the troop has learnt that the behaviour has rewards attached to it, and so will repeat the tactic. The same applies to the lifting of sliding doors.

Once members of the troop have enjoyed a food reward they're likely to return to the source, even if it's no longer visible or available.

And it's clear that we're now at the point on Raptor's View where baboons consider all houses as potential sources of that high-calorie food reward.

Since our troops are still relatively wary of humans, they target unoccupied homes where they can play undisturbed.

Human Response

How we react to these challenges is crucial, since lethal retaliation can have a heavy impact on the social dynamics within the troop, as mentioned above.

Identifying the culprits and damage causing baboons

We need to appreciate the difficulty of identifying 'damage-causing baboons' before targeting them for destruction, especially in the Raptor's View troops which are relatively wary of humans, and so are not easy to study at close quarters.

The typical baboon play session:

Juveniles will chase each other across decks and awnings, swim in pools, and slide down thatch roofs, play on and with furniture on the deck and run off with cushions or any movable object on the deck during play; play that begins with the youngest baboons attracts older, bigger baboons. This is where the commotion and damage happens and often attracts human attention – catching the adult males red-handed, although they were not the instigators.

Reward vs Punishment

For baboons, a potential food reward is a far more powerful incentive to continue raiding houses, than any deterrent punishment would serve.

It has been proven time and again that 'punishment' doesn't work – except to satisfy our human need for revenge.

Baboons will return as soon as the coast is clear. Pepper-spray, pellet guns, paint ball guns and slingshots are ineffective as a permanent deterrent. Baboons that have been severely wounded by people have been seen back in the area within hours. They associate the pain with the person who inflicts it, not with the area. So as soon as the person with the weapon is gone, the baboons feel safe to enter the area again. The same applies when a baboon from the troop is shot.

This is further demonstrated by Cape Town's experience with their Baboon Monitors. It was originally thought that if the monitors chased baboons away from suburbs for a few months, they would eventually come to prefer foraging undisturbed in the natural fynbos. Twenty years later, permanent monitors are still required.

Destroying Problem Animals

Destroying problem baboons should be a last resort when they have become a danger to humans.

The challenge will be to identify the culprits. The knee-jerk response is to shoot the adult males. Arbitrarily shooting a large male does nothing to manage the problem. Because it's the females who determine the troop's culture, know their range intimately and who show the males around. And as described above, it'll often be juveniles who instigate play on houses, or investigate novel food sources. Many baboons have been killed on Raptor's View, and yet the raiding continues.

A troop losing an alpha male will acquire a new dominant male which can lead to disruption of social relationships, infanticide and related trauma. Immigrant males will simply adapt to the troop's existing culture, which now includes raiding and playing on houses.

Even taking the extreme measure of destroying the entire troop won't work on its own, because another troop will simply move into the vacuum. It will take just one resident to be less than vigilant about securing access to food and the problem will begin all over again.

It's clear that baboons are motivated by reward, more than they are deterred by what we humans think of as punishment.

The focus must be on a combination of measures including removing the rewards and preventing access to inside houses and employing trained monitors, rather than punishing or destroying baboons

Management

Unfortunately, having reached the level we have, we need residents to understand that the baboon situation is never going to go away. The best we can do is manage it and try to reduce the frequency and severity of the incidents.

This is going to require physical measures and lifestyle changes from residents, as well as proactive management steps such as continuing the employment of full-time, trained baboon monitors.

For more reading on the subject, here are some links to a series of recent informative articles written about baboons in the Cape.

https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-02-monkey-business-there-is-an-ongoing-urban-war-on-the-cape-peninsula-humans-versus-baboons-part-one/?fbclid=IwAR3BqNVJIQUruG3y4ByxlpHd-PxtZmnNWhU0QATFb9M4Z6hpW1m8Tz_LfGI

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-05-monkey-business-part-two-who-is-responsible-for-the-management-of-baboons-on-the-cape-peninsula/>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-06-monkey-business-part-three-cape-peninsulas-dated-baboon-management-plan-is-a-failure-say-critics/>