Honeybee nests at Katkrans and Bridgetown.

Top left to right: within the tangled roots of a Namaqua fig tree; In the top of a cleft in the cliff-face.

Middle, left to right: on the cliff-face: note the previous extent of the nest prior to robbing and its partial enclosure with propolis; In a recess in the cliff-face with its entrance covered with propolis; Honeybee nest in the cliff-face with its entrance covered with propolis.

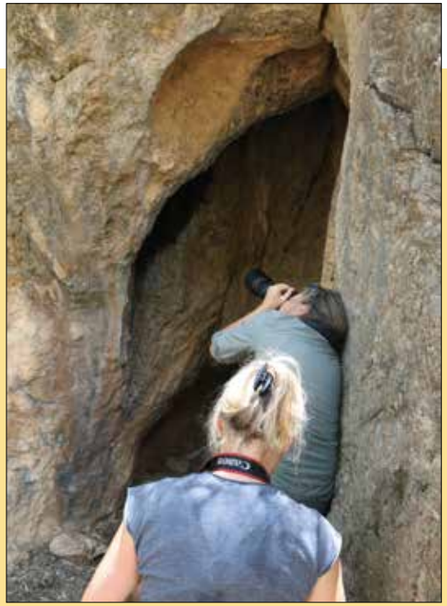
Right: Another nest in a cleft at Katkrans.

Opposite: Karin observes a honeybee nest within the hollowed stem of a Namaqua fig at Bridgetown with entrances both in the stem and at its base.

Startled response of honeybees

On entering a crevice in the cliff face the size of a guard-box while looking up for possible honeybee nests, a sharp 'hiss' sound was heard and there at chest height and a metre away was a huge swarm covering several combs. This abrupt sound is made when a colony is startled and is often heard when a hive lid is suddenly lifted off without any warning given to the inactive bees. The loudness of the 'hiss' indicates that it is a response produced by the majority of bees who simultaneously raise their abdomens in the air with their stings protruding. The bees generally remain like this for several seconds but do not attempt to fly off the combs or sting if not further provoked.

Two weeks later this colony was again visited in order to record and determine the frequency of the 'hiss' but this time the visitor was protected by a veil. The surprise was reversed



this time as the bees immediately attacked the interloper and the rest of the team about 30 metres away had also to flee. It is possible that the colony had been disturbed in the interim and was exceptionally alert.

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and that the bees collected it and returned it to the hive?

It was obvious that the bees had made their nests here from time immemorial, honeybees always being attracted to build nests where previous swarms had built in the past. Such nests in cliff faces are largely safe from most predators except man and this has been mentioned by such authors as Lawrence Green[43] and G.W. Stow[114] occurring also in the Karoo where the Bushmen *"came in summer to gather honey from high crevices where the bees had made their hives from time immemorial."*

Old maps of the Cape Peninsula which contain references to localities such as 'Bynes' invariably refer to nests in cliffs which have been there from time immemorial. Similarly, the name of the Heuningnes River in the Overberg was apparently named after a honeybee nest in a cave near the mouth of the river.

Mr Jan Carstens whose farm also adjoins the southern Heuningberg told Mr van Mieghem that:

> If a person gazed at the Heuningberg in 1946 during August, September and October when the plants were flowering, the whole mountain looked like a colossal migratory swarm of bees.

Just how many colonies would there have to have been present on the mountain to give such an impression, Mr van Mieghem asks? He recounted in 1995 that in earlier years he removed some of the largest swarms he had ever seen – with combs as long as a person – from the Heuningberg.

The Bridgetown nest that has been raided regularly but has survived for hundreds, possibly even thousands of years.

Could these have been rather at Katkrans where, if hanging from the cave ceiling there was ample room for elongated combs?

Such honeybee nests are largely free of mammalian predators except man and baboons; baboons love honey and climb the precipices to raid the nests despite the defence of the bees as they plunge their arms into the huge combs[43]. The Heuningberg nests have been continually raided by descendants of the original Khoi population right up until today. The same bravery is required to climb up a rickety ladder with a smoking torch to a fair height and sometimes a difficult rock incline to cut out and remove combs to be placed in a container whilst being attacked by thousands of bees. Defending honeybees would also be recruited from nearby swarms in the same cliff face because, as every African beekeeper is aware, working one hive sets off a reaction throughout the apiary.

Honeybee nests are occasionally constructed under a tangle of branches of trees but do not survive because they are relatively easy to rob. Often heat and the weight of the combs eventually cause the collapse of these nests. Such a nest in a Syringa tree in Pretoria was monitored where the propolis sheath enclosing the nest was opened at its point each year and the combs extended[141]. Late rains, a lack of cloud cover and a deciduous tree with no new leaves, but with pollen and honey stores being gathered none the same, caused the wax and propolis to melt and the nest to crash to the ground[142]. A similar nest high in the interlocking branches of a pine tree in Cape Town suffered the same fate on two occasions (see p134). The bees either returned to the attachment site or absconded and were replaced by a migrating swarm.

Although the Heuningberg itself was not