



ILLUSTRATIONS TONY GROGAN

Ways to fight the chacma crime wave

Baboons may be hardened criminals, but let's not resort to violence, writes a slightly scarred Richard Asher. There are other ways and means.

There are plenty of ways to infuriate the average South African male. Leon Schuster can do it in 30 seconds, using only a fake beard and a dodgy accent. But you don't need to be a professional showman to raise a fellow's hackles. You can simply question the guy's abilities with a spanner. Or tackle him heavily to the ground.

But such offences can, with time, be forgotten. There is one transgression, though, that no man is ever likely to forgive: stealing food off his braai.

Trust me, I've been there. The moment that garlic bread left our sizzling skottel at Cape Point, I knew it was over between *Papio ursinus* and me. Maybe I could have contemplated giving the chacma baboon species a second chance if that hairy old monkey hadn't added insult to injury by knocking the entire braai over as

he performed his grab-and-run operation. So not only had he run off with our starter, but he'd also brought the entire outing to a halt. I hope he burnt his mouth.

This episode was my first real brush with South Africa's biggest concentration of criminals outside Pollsmoor Prison. The second followed only a few seconds later. While our alpha male disappeared into the bush to further enhance his halitosis (probably a plus in baboon society – a place, after all, in which cultivating outrageous derrières seems to go down a treat), one of his mates appeared from nowhere and began to terrorise a nearby Gauteng-registered vehicle. The gentleman owner had parked his Toyota, left his door open and gone off to take photos.

He'd never have done that back home, of course, but visiting the Cape utopia must have made him drop his guard. Unfortunately so,

because when he turned around it was to witness his upholstery being savaged by a reckless brute of a simian, for no apparent reason. After opening and shutting various doors in a bid to coax the unsightly whirlwind out of the car, the animal eventually complied, but not before leaving plenty of stinking evidence of his fruity breakfast at the scene of the crime. Stolen breakfast, I'd imagine.

Once out of the car, thug number two bared his teeth, barked like a chained-up Alsatian and loped off back to den. The Gautenger was distraught and I was speechless. You never think crime will happen to you until it does. Suddenly I began to think about fighting the wave.

The time-honoured way of dealing with miscreants is prison. We wouldn't even need a major transport operation to make

it happen. Most of the Cape's naughtiest baboons carry out their hell-raising within sight of Pollsmoor. I think I'd be right in guessing that they've even been caught trespassing there and stealing food. Well, if they like it so much, let them stay.

The presence of a chacma baboon in each cell would certainly add an interesting dynamic to prison life. I suspect that they'd form their own gang, one that would put the incumbent 20-somethings firmly in their place. Feeding time would also be a little one-sided. Unless, of course, the baboons steal enough from the prison delivery trucks by breakfast-time to be satisfied for the day.

Not that they ever seem satisfied. That's a big part of the problem. Meet a boa constrictor or a pride of lions just after they've eaten, and they're likely to leave you in peace. But

baboons are always hungry. Five seconds after their first morsel of misappropriated food, they're searching for the next. The Baboon Matters website tells me that this is why they prefer our food to what they find in the fynbos – a quick raid on your kitchen is much more nutritionally rewarding than their traditional foraging. The contents of your larder supposedly gives them a chance to rest a while before the next attack. I can't quite work out whether that's useful to know or not – but it can't be good news.

Is putting baboons in prison with regular house-breakers and muggers really that far-fetched? Have you been robbed recently? Did you assume that the intruders were human? Did the police find any suspects? Well, did they? Next time you see a baboon disappear into a cave to watch a DVD on his 72-inch flat screen, ask yourself those questions again.

Prevention is better than cure, of course. They say education is the best long-term crime solution, and I couldn't agree more. Everyone keeps telling me how clever baboons are, so let's get their purple backsides in classrooms and make 'em write the Senior Certificate.

I suppose it wouldn't be fair for our children to have such stinky creatures sitting in the desks around them, so I wouldn't advocate putting the beasts into regular schools. The only good argument for doing so would be that the big kids would get to learn what it's like to have their lunch money taken.

I think, rather, that specialist boarding institutions would be the way to go. If we could get the creatures trained up in basic ethics and the civilised behaviour that most other animals seem to manage, we might turn this problem around.

As I mentioned earlier, these animals need to learn the value of regular mealtimes – these would need to be strictly enforced. The

tuck shop would, in fact, be the most important classroom of them all. All the world's baboon troubles hinge on the acquisition and consumption of food. Address that issue, and those problems are gone. Teaching the class to queue in orderly fashion at the tuck shop would be an essential daily routine. And the success of that exercise would ultimately define the success of the school.

Teachers might be reluctant at first, but could find the work extremely rewarding. Imagine seeing your first baboon class pass matric in full school uniform, before heading to tertiary education and careers in law, education or (ideally) the military. Perhaps even nature conservation or social work. But although Jeremy Taylor's 1960s song on the matter was an amusing one, I'd have to draw the line at letting one into parliament.

You'd also get to coach a formidable sports team. Those schools rugby festivals just wouldn't be the same. Even Affies and Paarl Gym might think twice about turning up for a game against Chacma High. An internal league it might have to be...

As much as we need to train baboons, though, we also need to train tourists. I hear a chorus of approval from the baboon protection societies, but there's more to it than telling our clueless friends from overseas not to feed anything that looks like a monkey. I haven't forgotten vervets, by the way, KZN readers. I know they can be a food pest too. But the thing is, well, they don't bark or have canines bigger than those of a lion. And they're kinda cute. Case closed.

Ah yes, our overseas visitors. The ones on buses are particularly susceptible, because they've forgotten how to think for themselves ever since they checked

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in for their flight to Africa. By the time they get to Cape Point, they often find themselves in a stupor, unable to analyse a situation as they might back home. These are the ones we need to watch.

The key problem to be spelt out to our foreign friends is the misconception that baboons fall into the "cute" category. Tourists who have seen said monkeys earlier in their trip won't fall into this trap, but those for whom Cape Town is the first port of call can get it horribly wrong. And when something is cute and you're a north European, it must automatically be approached, stroked and fed.

You can see how it happens. Most baboons are only half the height of a human, and look relatively unthreatening. As long as those canines remain hidden, they can even remind us of how our children looked in their early months. Plus, they have mastered a deceptively benign and pensive look, engineered specifically for drawing the unsuspecting into close range.

The fun part comes when the tourist gets too close or teases the creature with food. In a flash that potent jaw flies open in a flurry of saliva and sharpened teeth, and a bark befitting a hound of hell rips through the air. If you enjoy watching middle-aged Swedish housewives fly backwards through the air, this is a moment to savour.

As I think I've made clear, I'm all for reconciliation and rehabilitation. But all those coming into contact with baboons should be warned in no uncertain terms.

Baboons are best treated as guilty until proven innocent. When in their habitat, behave respectfully and much as you would in a dark alley at 3 am. Remember that these are animals that will urinate on your windscreen without a trace of shame. Oh, and leave the braai at home. ■

