



FROM DUST TO GOLD

In part two of his Year in the Wild series, **Scott Ramsay** travels to the remote Karoo to revel in the beauty of a national park once written off as a conservation no-hoper.

It was that time of day when everything seems right with the world. The sun was falling in the kaleidoscopic western sky, as the stars sparkled softly in anticipation of the night's imminent arrival. I drove west along a deserted gravel road, a trail of golden dust in my wake. I felt like a space traveller flying through the Milky Way, wild and free.

My destination was Varschfontein, an adobe cottage in the far west of the Tankwa Karoo National Park, where I was to spend the night. It's isolated and remote, an hour's drive from the nearest inhabitants.

As the sun touched the horizon, a strange silhouette ambled towards me on the road. Like two travellers in space who bump randomly into

OPPOSITE: Tankwa Karoo National Park is surrounded by farmland. Here two donkeys catch a sunset drink at one of the many windmills in the area. **THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** There are more than 3 000 plant species in the succulent Karoo; Tankwa seems to be in the middle of nowhere, perfect for people who love space; an aardvark in the veld of Tankwa; the view from the top of Elandsberg.

each other in the vastness of the universe, we both stopped, both surprised, as if marvelling at the coincidence.

Then it struck me. An aardvark! Its pointed ears, long snout, stooping gait and reptilian tail left no doubt. What luck! These secretive creatures – stranger than science fiction – are endangered, and their crepuscular habits makes them difficult – and rewarding – to see. Neither of us moved, watching, waiting.

Then I came to my senses. My camera! Get my camera! I frantically found the long lens, attached it to my camera, opened the door quietly and walked slowly to the aardvark.

No more than 20 metres away, the aardvark kept sauntering towards me – its eyesight is poor, so it relies instead on its prodigious sense of smell to find its way. Then, as it picked up my scent in the stillness of the Karoo dusk, it stopped in its tracks, its pig-like snout sniffing the air anxiously. Startled, it ran off the road, scampering away through the veld, its trail of dust illuminated in gold. What a surprise.



Surprise wonders

The Tankwa Karoo, between Ceres and Calvinia in the Northern Cape, is that sort of place: full of surprises. From afar this secluded valley, between the Roggeveld Mountains of the great escarpment and the Cederberg in the west, seems distinctly unspectacular. For most of the year, the incessant heat of the southern sun bakes the ground. The succulent vegetation withers. The antelope search out every inch of shade. Everything seems to gasp for breath, as temperatures soar into the 40s. >



Tankwa Karoo is a radiant example of what's possible if the land is given time and space to recover



ABOVE: The hills of the Roggeveld Mountains receive significantly more rainfall than the rest of the park. **RIGHT:** The park is an amalgamation of reclaimed farmland and there are still old cottages which make for fun photography. This one is near Varschfontein Cottage in the northwest of the park.



For hundreds of years the Tankwa Karoo was used by livestock farmers, who moved nomadically through the area, giving the land a chance to recover from grazing. But when fences were erected and title deeds bought, the land couldn't cope with the intensity of livestock grazing. The veld collapsed and degraded, to the point where conservationists were ready to give up on its potential revival.

At one stage, about 20 years ago, even South African National Parks – its custodian – believed it to be unworthy of conserving. Even fewer had yet researched or understood its diverse ecology. Hope for a revival seemed scant and then-head of the organisation, Dr Robbie Robinson, remarked: 'I cannot see that it really meets the criteria I look for in areas deserving national park status.'

But that was then. This is now. For 20 years up to 2005, the park was off-limits to the public. No-one was allowed in. Like a long-suffering patient, the overgrazed veld needed time to slowly nurture itself back to health. Today, the area has surprised conservationists, botanists, tourists, photographers and even farmers. Tankwa Karoo is a sparkling gem in the national parks system and a radiant example of what's possible to achieve, if the land is given time and space to recover.

Every spring, the dry, dusty land throws the biggest surprise party of all as it explodes into colour as vygies, daisies and bulbs emerge with the onset of soothing winter rains. It's a

sight to rival the famous Namaqualand flower displays, and it confirms for park manager Conrad Strauss all the hard work and patience has paid off. 'This park is totally different from all the others,' the former farmer's son commented. 'People used to believe this area wasn't worth anything, but they were completely wrong.'

The numbers prove it. Tankwa Karoo National Park conserves a large portion of succulent Karoo vegetation, a hotspot of biodiversity with more than 3 000 plant species, the richest concentration of desert flora in the world. About 70 per cent of the park's plant species are found nowhere else.

With the recovery of the veld, Conrad and his team have reintroduced a number of animal species. 'The veld actually needs a bit of trampling and grazing,' Conrad explained. 'Otherwise it wouldn't thrive ... but of course it can't be overgrazed, so we're constantly monitoring the carrying capacity of the land.' There are now 250 gemsbok, 160 red hartebeest, 500 springbok, 35 Cape Mountain zebras and about 20 kudu. 'Those kudu have come all the way from Beaufort West,' Conrad told me. 'Previously, they would have been hunted here, but now they've found the sanctuary of the park, they seem to be thriving. They've come to stay and it obviously feels like home for them.'

Another surprise is the diversity of environments. For most, the word Karoo denotes an endless flat landscape. The Tankwa Karoo is different. In the west, desert-like conditions prevail, receiving only about 30 millimetres of rainfall every year. But as you move east, everything changes.

Soon grasslands appear, covering the so-called Springbok Vlaktes. Out of the flatlands, tall flat-topped koppies stand sentinel. From the top of Elandsberg, you're rewarded with the best view in the park. Endless panoramic views stretch west to the stark outline of the Cederberg, more than 60 kilometres away. Then further east, the escarpment of the Roggeveld rises into the sky, with its summer rainfall, shaded kloofs and trickling streams that flow intermittently.

Lonesome and loving it

The natural splendour and remote location of Tankwa Karoo lends it a sense of wilderness, but another surprise is the accommodation. 'People think this is a really wild place – which it is – but then they arrive here and they're surprised at the comfortable, stylish accommodation,' Conrad told me.

Perhaps the favourite among visitors is the Elandsberg Wilderness Camp, comprising five chalets looking south-east over a vast plain, framed on the horizon by the Roggeveld Mountains. These self-catering chalets each have a pool, braai area, deck chairs, kitchen, lounge and bedroom with a huge window in front of the double bed and an open shower. The other accommodation options are old farm houses, carefully restored to former glory: De Zyfer, Paulshoek and Varschfontein, and they're all located in far-flung places of the park, ensuring complete privacy and seclusion for visitors.

The park has grown from 27 000 to 146 000 hectares and every piece of land was offered to SanParks by farmers who

moved away from the area, realising the futility of intensive livestock grazing. Now the park is the main source of income in the area, and the most sustainable. It seems as if nature has finally had its way in Tankwa Karoo and it's something that makes it such an attractive destination.

'People come here for the lonesomeness, that's why we're not planning more tourist facilities,' Conrad explained. 'We have about 4 600 visitors a year, but that's enough for this area. If you have any more, the park would lose its sense of space and silence.'

On my last morning, I drove the Leeuberg 4x4 route, on the northern border of the park. It climbs high onto a ridge of hills and the views were unsurprisingly spectacular. I had come to expect spectacular things from Tankwa Karoo.

Then I descended the hills on the northern side and came across a small valley, blooming with flowers, exceeding even what I had seen elsewhere in the park. The sun had worked its magic especially on this patch of land and the flowers were densely concentrated over several hundred metres. I thought I had seen Tankwa's magic, but once again, it had surprised me.

The land in the Tankwa Karoo has transformed itself – with some care from conservation – from dust to gold. Conrad echoed my sentiments when he told me: 'We're in the "forever" business. It takes a long time re-establish natural processes ... but it's worth it, don't you think?'



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For more on Tankwa Karoo National Park and Scott's travels, go to his blog and guide on Getaway's website tiny.cc/ScottRamsayBlog, or visit www.yearinthewild.com.

TRAVEL PLANNER

Getting there

Tankwa Karoo National Park straddles the border of the Western and Northern Cape, between the towns of Ceres and Calvinia and is a five-hour drive from Cape Town. Take the N1 north, turning left onto the R43 before Worcester. Pass through Ceres, take the R46 and then the R355 to Calvinia. About 110 kilometres after Ceres, look for the signs to the park. Turn right and travel along the P2250 road

for about 70 kilometres until you cross the Renoster River. Park reception is on the right.

What you need to know

Visitors need to take along food, water and fuel (the water at some camps is brackish). The nearest petrol station, shop and bottle store is 50 kilometres away in Middelpos. The roads are gravel and some are corrugated or pot-holed, especially after rain. A 4x4 or vehicle with high ground



In conjunction with *Getaway*, Scott Ramsay is exploring 31 of South Africa's most special nature reserves, including all the national parks. Follow his progress at the websites above, as well as www.facebook.com/YearInTheWild and links on Getaway's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/GetawayMagazine. Major sponsors include Ford, Total, EvoSat and Goodyear.

clearance is recommended. A daily conservation fee of R20 a person applies to South African citizens and residents, except Wild Cardholders.

it closes. Monday to Thursday: 08h00 to 17h00, Friday: 08h00 to 21h00, Saturday: 08h00 to 17h00, Sunday: 10h00 to 16h00.

Gates and entry times

There are no gates to the Tankwa Karoo National Park, but all guests must report to Roodewerf Reception before

Useful contacts

Reception and office, tel 027-341-1927, fax 027-341-2814, www.sanparks.org, email tankwa@sanparks.org.

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WHERE TO STAY

There are two campsites with ablution facilities, both within the Roggeveld Mountains: one at **Langkloof** in the north-east of the park, and one at **Perdekloof** in the southeast. Langkloof has two campsites with communal ablutions (shower and toilet), while Perdekloof has six campsites, each with their own ablutions (shower and toilet). Both campsites have drinkable bore-hole water. There are also four campsites without facilities – at **Biesjesfontein** and **Volmoersfontein** in the west, at **Skaapwagtersbos** in the north and at **Steenkampshoek** in the east. Campers need to be completely self-sufficient. Camping is from R90 a night for the first two people (R40 an additional adult, R20 a child).

to **Elandsberg Wilderness Camp** in the northern part of the park consists of five self-catering chalets on a ridge overlooking a vast plain which rises into the Roggeveld Mountains. Each has an open-plan kitchen, living room with fireplace and queen-size sleeper couch, and are fully equipped with gas stoves and fridge and hot water. There's no electricity and paraffin lamps and candles are supplied. Each chalet is out of sight of the others and has a splash pool (necessary during summer), a braai area and shower looking out onto the veld (but no bath). There are four one-bedroom, four-sleeper cottages with sleeper couches (one is wheel-chair friendly) and one two-bedroom cottage, sleeping six people. Bed linen and towels are provided. A six-sleeper family cot-



The Gannaga Pass in the northeast of the park leads to the privately run Gannaga Lodge where guests can enjoy a cold beer.



The view from a chalet at Elandsberg Wilderness Camp.



A bedroom at Elandsberg Wilderness Camp.

tage costs R1 170 a night for the first four people (R185 an additional adult). Four-sleeper cottages are R930 a night.

to **De Zyfer Cottage** is an early 1900s cottage about two kilometres south of the Roodewerf reception and is closest of all the park's accommodation to the Roggeveld Mountains. It's fully equipped for self-catering and has two bedrooms and a sleeper couch, accommodating up to six people. **Paulshoek Cottage** is also an early 1900s cottage with views of the Roggeveld Mountains. It's about five kilometres south of the Roodewerf reception and sleeps six people. **Varschfontein Cottage** in the north-west sleeps nine people in three rooms and is about 45 kilometres from reception. There is a reservoir in which to swim. Self-catering from R505 for the first two people (R172 an additional adult, R86 a child).

to **Tanqua Guesthouse** is a

converted private guesthouse in the southwest of the park, with five bedrooms, a communal pool and kitchen area. Although it's self-catering, the park can supply food and arrange catering with advanced warning. Self-catering from R505 for the first two people to R875 for four (R172 an additional adult, R86 a child). Nearby is the self-catering **Tanqua Family Cottage** which has four bedrooms and can be hired only in its entirety. Self-catering from R1 095 for the first four (R172 an additional adult, R86 a child).

to **Gannaga Lodge** is privately operated and is situated on private land within the national park. It's the only place in the park which offers full catering and a bar. From R220 to R320 a person a night sharing. Breakfast and dinner are available at extra cost. Tel 027-341-2766, email manager@gannaga.com, www.gannaga.com.



Varschfontein Cottage

Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 – R499 R500 – R750 R751 – R999 R1000+



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