



»» YEAR IN THE WILD

Resurrection of the Tankwa Karoo

With Scott Ramsay

As part of his year-long expedition to 31 of South Africa's nature reserves, including all the national parks, photojournalist Scott Ramsay travelled to the Tankwa Karoo National Park in one of the country's forgotten corners, and discovered a flower display to rival Namaqualand's



Above: The aardvark is a nocturnal creature, so Scott was fortunate to spot this one trotting next to a road. Below: The most impressive view of Tankwa Karoo is from the top of the Elandsberg, which can be reached via a 4x4 route.



The Tankwa Karoo National Park, named after the seasonal Tankwa River in the south of the park, is a place of big skies and distant horizons.

Lying between the Cederberg mountains and the Great Karoo escarpment, it incorporates three distinct ecosystems – pure desert in the west, open grasslands in the centre and the Roggeveld mountains in the east. The Roggeveld range is the start of the escarpment and a vital contributor to the park's water supply.

The meaning of the name, Tankwa, is uncertain, but it could be translated as "turbid water", "place of the San", or "thirst land".

Tankwa was proclaimed in 1986 as a developmental park of 26 000ha. The veld

had been severely degraded by livestock overgrazing, and for the first few years it wasn't open to the public. Humans have lived in the region for at least 10 000 years – first the Bushmen and then the Khoe pastoralists, who moved their livestock with the migration of the wild animals. Then, in the 1700s, the trekboer farmers started using the Tankwa to graze their dorper and merino sheep while moving from the summer heat of the Cederberg to the cooler temperatures on the Karoo escarpment.

Eventually, farmers settled there, but the arid climate and poor soils meant that non-nomadic livestock grazing wasn't sustainable.

Once Tankwa had been proclaimed a national park, various farms were bought and added to the conservation area, which today

extends to about 131 000ha.

The park's dry landscape bursts into colour in July and August, when winter rains bring vitality to what is mostly an arid ecosystem. The park falls within the Succulent Karoo biome – one of only two entirely arid biodiversity hotspots in the world (the other is the Horn of Africa). A staggering 70% of the park's 3 000 plant species are endemic, meaning they aren't found anywhere else in the world.

Contrary to initial belief, the park's vegetation does need a certain amount of trampling and grazing to thrive. Currently, the park is monitoring the grazing effects of springbok, gemsbok, red hartbeest, Cape mountain zebra and kudu, to determine an optimum animal capacity.

BEST DRIVES

The park's roads are all gravel, and although a 4x4 vehicle or one with high ground clearance is recommended, you can drive on most of the roads in a sedan. The intersections are well signposted. The entire park makes for scenic driving.

The 6km Gannaga Pass can be reached by driving north from the Roodewerf reception area, turning onto the P2250 towards the town of Middelpos. This pass offers a spectacular switchback route from the vast plain below, up through the Roggeveld mountains onto the escarpment.

The Elandsberg 4x4 route starts near the Elandsberg Wilderness Camp, and is about a 4km drive to the top of the koppie of the same name, where the most spectacular view in the park awaits.

The Leeueberg 4x4 route starts near Varschfontein Cottage in the west of the park, and runs north towards the park boundary. It follows the ridge line of a series of koppies before descending onto a plain.



Above, right: The chalets at Elandsberg Wilderness Camp offer great accommodation. Top: The roads in the Tankwa Karoo region are hard on the tyres, so it's worth deflating them a bit. Above: The Everest on the Leeueberg 4x4 route.



WHERE TO STAY

Elandsberg Wilderness Camp in the northern central part of the park offers five self-catering chalets with incredible views. They are located on a ridge overlooking a vast plain which rises into the Roggeveld mountains. The chalets have an open-plan kitchen, living room with fireplace and queen-sized sleeper couch, and are fully-equipped with gas stoves, fridges and hot water, but there is no electricity. Paraffin lamps and candles are supplied. Each chalet is situated out of sight of the others, and each has a splash pool – marvellous in the summer – a braai area, and a shower which looks out onto the veld (but no bath). There are four one-bedroom cottages (with sleeper couch), all sleeping four people. One of the cottages is wheel-chair friendly. There is one two-bedroom cottage, sleeping six people. Bed linen and towels are provided.



De Zyfer Cottage is an early 1900s cottage situated about 2km south of the Roodewerf reception area, and is closest of all the park's accommodation to the Roggeveld mountains. It is fully equipped for self-catering, and has two bedrooms and a sleeper couch, accommodating a maximum of six people. It has good views of the mountains.

Paulshoek Cottage also dates from the early 1900s and has good views of the Roggeveld mountains. It is about 5km south of Roodewerf and sleeps six.

Varschfontein Cottage sleeps nine in three rooms, and is situated in the northwest of the park, about 45km from Roodewerf. There is a reservoir to swim in.

Tanqua Guest House is a converted private guesthouse in the southwest of the park, with five bedrooms, a kitchen area and a communal pool. Although it is self-catering, the park can supply food and arrange for catering, but advance booking is necessary. Nearby is the self-catering Tanqua Family Cottage. It has four bedrooms, and can only be hired in its entirety.

Gannaga Lodge is privately operated and is situated on private land, though it lies within the national park. It is the only place in the park that offers full catering and a bar.

For more information, tel 027 341 2766, e-mail manager@gannaga.com or www.gannaga.com



GETTING THERE

The Tankwa Karoo straddles the border of the Western and Northern Cape, between the towns of Ceres and Calvinia. The park is about a five-hour drive from Cape Town.

Visitors will need to bring their own food, water and fuel (the water at some of the camps and chalets is brackish).

The nearest petrol station, general dealer and bottle store are in Middelpos, 50km away, but the park does sell diesel fuel and braai wood.



Top: Tankwa Karoo covers a diverse range of habitat, but most of the park falls within the Succulent Karoo biome. Centre: The best time of year to visit the Tankwa is from June to September, when flowers are in bloom. Above, left to right: The vygie *Cheiridopsis namaquensis*. The geophyte *Oxalis annae*. The gifbol.

WHO TO CONTACT

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**TRIP REPORT:
YEAR IN THE WILD**

I am travelling for a year to photograph and document our country's last remaining wild places, raising awareness for their continued protection. For blogs, photos and updates which are uploaded via Evosat, go to www.yearinthewild.com and www.facebook.com/yearinthewild.

Year in the Wild is sponsored by **Total, Ford, Evosat, Fronrunner, EeziAwn, Goodyear, National Luna, Global Fleet Sales, Garmin, Escape Gear, Safari Centre Cape Town, Vodacom, Conqueror Trailers, Digicape, Lacie and Clearstream Consulting.**

The Ford Everest 4x4 I'm driving continues to be a highly capable vehicle. One of the most impressive things about it is the fuel consumption, which averages 10 litres per 100km. This is very good, especially considering that I have an EeziAwn rooftop tent, which must reduce the aerodynamics considerably.

Global Fleet Sales fitted a custom-made 110-litre long range fuel tank, and I can drive about 1100km before running out of fuel. The Ford is great to drive on the open road – not surprising when you consider that the three-litre turbo diesel engine has won several awards. When I get onto loose gravel, I usually engage four-wheel drive, which gives the car some extra control. But by far the most important factor when it comes to driving on the stony roads of the Tankwa Karoo is tyre pressure. I let down my Goodyear Wrangler tyres to about 1,9 bar, and this definitely makes the ride more comfortable, while protecting the tyres. Just remember to pump up your tyres again when you get back on the tar!

My fuel supplier, Total, continues to work with South African National Parks, funding several of their environmental education initiatives, including Kids in Kruger. This is a programme for children who live in communities on the borders of Kruger National Park yet seldom have the chance to visit it. With funding from Total, more than 200 000 children between the ages of eight and 16 have now experienced the wonders of SA's most famous game reserve. Long may this programme last! I hope other companies will start funding similar projects. 🌍