



»» YEAR IN THE WILD

Namaqua National Park's old (and new) wonders

With Scott Ramsay

As part of his year-long expedition to 31 of South Africa's nature reserves, including all the national parks, photo journalist Scott Ramsay discovered that Namaqua National Park is not all about flowers. It also has a beautiful coastline where visitors can see a thriving Cape fur seal colony

Main and insert: Namaqualand is world famous for its spring flower displays in August and September, and the Namaqua National Park is the largest protected area in this region. However, the large tracts of single-coloured flowers are not natural - they are in fact an indication of overgrazing by sheep and goats.



CARACAL ECO-ROUTE

The Caracal Eco-Route is perhaps the best way to fully appreciate the park. Although it is supposed to be a one-day 4x4 trail covering 156km, it is definitely better to do it as a two-day trail. This would mean spending the night at one of the camping sites on the coast, or staying at Luiperdskloof Cottage.

You would be hard pressed to finish the route comfortably in a day, especially if you want to stop and take photographs or have a picnic lunch. The route starts at the Skilpad reception area and makes its way west down the Kamiesberg escarpment into the koppies and valleys below. From there it turns north towards Wildperdehoek Pass, which is the gravel road between Springbok and Hondeklipbaai. The route follows this road west towards the coast but turns south, through the botanically famous Riethuis Quartz fields, which harbour some of the most diverse succulent plants in the world.

Eventually you reach the coastal section of the park. It's about a 30km drive along sandy tracks to the gate at Groenrivier. Then it's about 80km to Garies on the N7, and another 40km back to Kamieskroon and the Skilpad offices. For visitors who don't want to stop overnight, the cost is R100 per vehicle.



ANATOLIAN SHEEP DOG BREEDING PROJECT

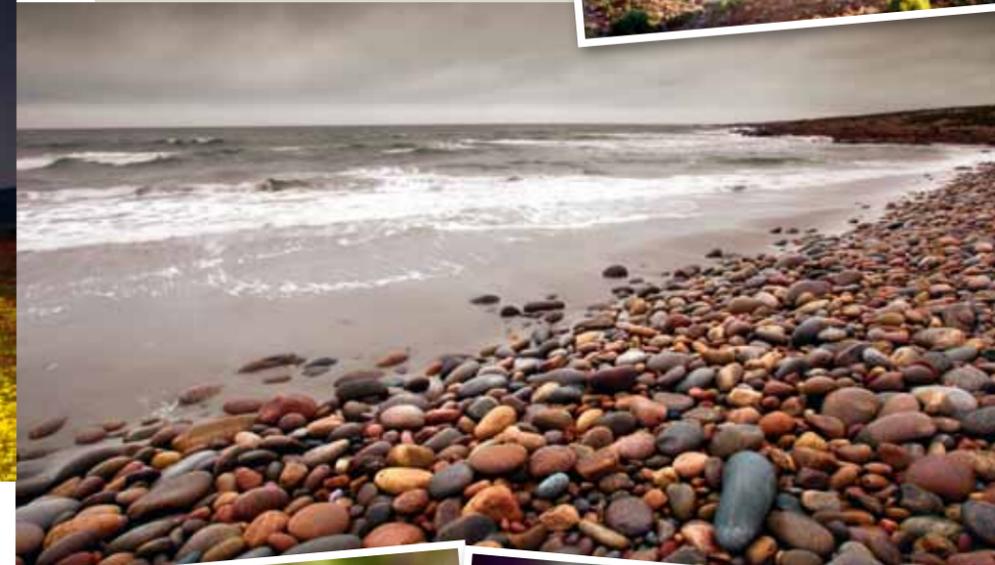
The park is surrounded by livestock farming, which is bad for the region's predators such as leopard, caracal and jackal, all of which are periodically snared and trapped by farmers.

However, besides the enormous harm done to the natural predators, which are vital cogs in the ecosystem, the traps also kill other animals such as the aardvark and small antelope.

The Cape Leopard Trust works in the region to help farmers develop ways to mitigate the loss of livestock. For more information, check out www.capeleopard.org.za.

Concurrently, the Namaqua National Park has a successful Anatolian dog breeding project, which supplies farmers with these effective sheep dogs. Originally from Turkey, these large dogs are excellent deterrents to predators and in cases where the dog has been trained properly, they are able to accompany the herd out into pasture in the morning, and return them safely at nightfall.

Top: The chalets at Skilpad Rest Camp are spectacularly situated on a crest looking west to the horizon. Above, insert: A sheep with a collar to prevent leopards, caracal and jackal from killing it. Left: The park now includes a large section of South Africa's west coast. Below: The diversity of plants is astonishing. The Succulent Karoo is one of only two entirely arid biodiversity hotspots in the world.



Namaqua National Park is a 150 000ha conservation area that starts in the Kamiesberg in the Northern Cape and extends west and south to the Atlantic coastline. Its undoubted importance is its centrality within the Succulent Karoo biome. The area is famous not only for its stupendous displays of spring flowers, especially daisies and *vygies*, but also for its unparalleled richness in succulent and bulb flora. About 1000 of its 3500 plant species are found nowhere else in the world.

The park is still in a developmental stage, and the recent addition of the pristine Groen-Spoeg coastal section has almost doubled its size.

Humans and their ancestors have been roaming Namaqualand (and the rest of

southern Africa) for at least three million years. There is evidence in the region of early Stone Age man, dating from about 800 000 years ago. Hand axes and cleavers have been found at various sites around Namaqualand.

In more recent times – in the past 2000 years or so – humans have passed through the region, following the antelope migrations. The nomadic San and then Khoi pastoralists lived here. The earliest evidence of sheep ownership in southern Africa has been found in the caves at Spoeg River, which now lies within the coastal section of the park. In the 1600s, Dutch settlers moved up from the Cape, some looking for minerals, others moving their livestock. Today, the region incorporates livestock farming, mining, eco-tourism and conservation.

The park was established in 2001 and various adjacent farms have been bought and added to the conservation area.

In 2008, De Beers donated the 30km coastal section between the Spoeg and Green rivers to the national park. Because this land has never been mined (unlike some parts of the north-west coast, which has been severely degraded by mining), it's in pristine condition and protects one of only two shore-based breeding colonies of Cape fur seals in SA.

The World Wildlife Fund and the government are also working to develop a marine protected area extending several kilometres out to sea. This would be the only maritime conservation zone north of the West Coast National Park near Langebaan.





TRIP REPORT: YEAR IN THE WILD, SUPPORTED BY TOTAL AND FORD

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

The project 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.

My fuel sponsor, Total, has just started sponsoring the Leopard Conservation Project in Limpopo. It is similar to the Cape Leopard Trust in Namaqualand, working to save leopards from snares and traps set by farmers and hunters.

Since 2000, when founder Fred Berrangé started the project, more than 75 leopards have been saved. Total sponsors the fuel so that Fred and his team can drive the long distances to rescue the leopards.

Well done to Total for contributing to this project, which makes a real difference in conservation. For more information, go to www.leopardcon.co.za.

As a photographer who uses a digital camera (a Canon EOS 5d Mark 2), I'm constantly having to process and back up my pictures. But often I'm in places where there's plenty of dust, dirt and wind. I dread losing my photos, so I rely on my computer equipment and external hard drives. Lacie Rugged Hard Drives are the industry leaders in tough portable storage of all things digital, and I have a few of their 1 Terabyte units stored in different parts of my car, each containing back-ups of my photos.

The Lacie drives seem to be coping very well with the heat, dust and the bouncing around on the bad gravel roads!

My camera shoots RAW files which are 20MB and bigger, so external storage is essential. I process all my photos on a 13-inch screen MacBook Pro, which Digicape has boosted with 8GB of RAM.

I am very happy with the system, and use Lightroom to process all my photos. It's amazing to think that I can process hundreds of photos on the day I took them, and still publish them on the internet with my Evosat satellite unit, so people around the world can see them. In the "old" days, the developing of film would take a few days, and then you'd still have to scan the photos!

I'm definitely more productive these days, but it does make me much busier! 🚗

WHERE TO STAY

Skilpad Rest Camp has four fully-equipped self-catering chalets, about a ten-minute drive west of the main reception area.

They all have views over the escarpment towards the far-off Atlantic coastline. Each has a bedroom, lounge, open-plan kitchen, enclosed veranda with dining area, and an indoor and outdoor braai. One of the units is wheelchair friendly. They accommodate a maximum of three adults, or two adults and two children. There is 240V electricity.

Luiperdskloof Cottage is remotely situated on the Caracal Eco-Route, in a valley surrounded by koppies in the Kamiesberg escarpment, in the north of the park. The beautifully built stone cottage can only be reached by 4x4. It can accommodate a maximum of six people in two bedrooms.

There is gas heating and stove, and paraffin lighting.

Above: Namaqua National Park has grown in size, and now includes several old farms and their abandoned homesteads. Below: One of the chalets at Skilpad Rest Camp. Bottom: There are several basic camp sites on the coastal section, but remember to take your own water for cooking, drinking and washing. There are enviro-loos.



CAMP SITES

There are no camping sites within the Skilpad section of the park, but there is an "unofficial" campsite at Kookfontein on the Caracal Eco-Route, about an hour's drive northwest of Skilpad. There are nine campsites in the coastal section. They are all clearly signposted off the main coastal track. From north to south along the coast they are: Boulderbaai, Skuinsbaai Noord, Koringkorrelbaai, Skuinsklip, Bamboeskamp, Mosselbank (camping site for hikers only), Varswater, Kwass se Baai and finally Delwerskamp. Each campsite has a braai area with protective walling against the prevailing south-easter. Toilets are "enviroloos".



WHO TO CONTACT

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