



**YEAR IN THE WILD**  
With Scott Ramsay

# The magic of Mkhambathi

As part of his year-long journey through 31 South African nature reserves, including all the national parks, photojournalist Scott discovered Mkhambathi, a small but special reserve on the sub-tropical shoreline of Pondoland

**Mkhambathi Nature Reserve** on the Pondoland Wild Coast is one of SA's most photogenic and pristine places. While the southern part of the Wild Coast can be very touristy, the north-eastern sector is still relatively unknown, untouched and quite remote. There are no Big 5 animals here, but Mkhambathi should be on everyone's list of must-visit nature reserves.

There is much to admire about this small (7000ha) protected area, which lies about 60km north-east of Port St Johns. Just 14km long and 12km wide, Mkhambathi conserves some of the country's most spectacular sub-

tropical shoreline, forest, grasslands, rivers and gorges.

Sheltered inlets and beaches offer respite from the crashing waves. Emerald grasslands roll down to the shores where eland and hartebeest roam against the backdrop of the Indian Ocean. Shy kudu antelope hide away in pockets of thick swamp forest, which echo with Knysna loeries.

The most extensive forest lies in the north-west of the reserve, in an area known as The Superbowl. An amphitheatre of sandstone cliffs surrounds several hectares of luminous high-canopy forest, where massive

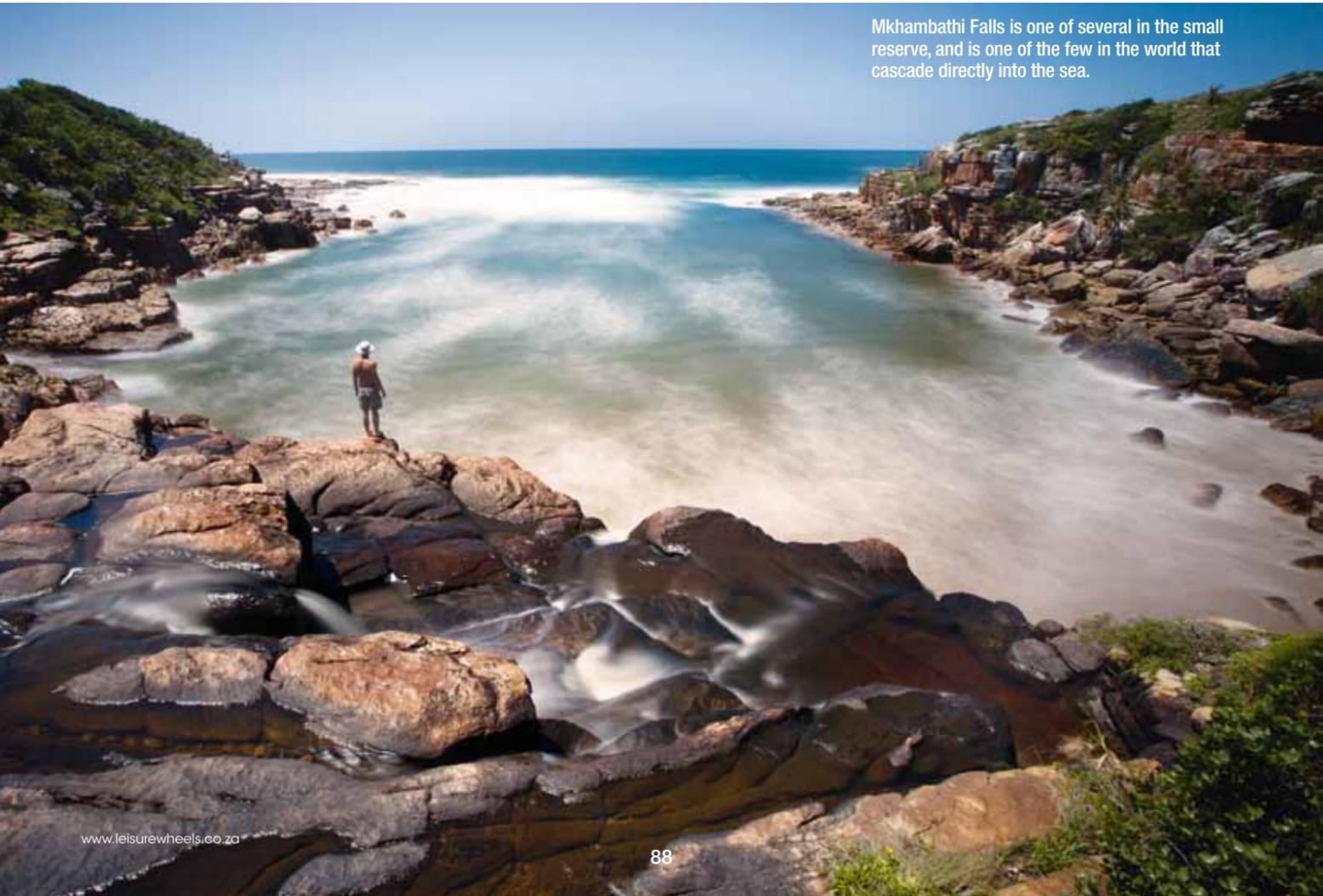
Outeniqua yellowwood and apple-leaf trees reach up into the sky.

In the middle of the crescent of cliffs, a river cascades 30m into the gorge below. A symphony of crashing water and singing birds is the soundtrack to a truly breathtaking sight – one of the most spectacular views I have seen on my journey.

This south-eastern sector of SA falls within one of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots – those areas that contain most of the earth's ecological richness yet are threatened because of man's development.

SA has three of these "hotspots", including

Mkhambathi Falls is one of several in the small reserve, and is one of the few in the world that cascade directly into the sea.



the Cape Floristic region, the Succulent Karoo and the Maputland-Pondoland-Albany region. This last hotspot stretches from the south of Mozambique all the way to the border of the Western Cape. At its centre is Mkhambathi.

The Maputland-Pondoland-Albany area has at least 600 tree species, the most of any temperate forest region in the world. When the reserve was declared in 1996, it was called Mkhambathi after the rare endemic palm (*Jubaeopsis caffra*), which grows only on the northern slopes of the Msikaba and Mtentu rivers at either end of the reserve's boundaries. It's one of the world's rarest and most localised plants.

The palm is just one of 196 endemic plant species out of 2200 that grow in Pondoland. Botanist Tony Abbott has been exploring the area for decades and has found several new species, some of which have been named after him.

"Mkhambathi is special for many reasons," he told me. "But botanically, it's one of just two protected areas within the Pondoland hotspot, so it's vital for conservation of plant diversity."

The three main rivers from south to north – Msikaba, Mkhambathi and Mtentu – cut deep gorges through the sandstone bedrock. One of SA's biggest Cape vulture colonies thrives on the cliff faces of the Msikaba gorge.

There are only a dozen or so waterfalls in the world that cascade directly into the sea, and the Wild Coast has three of them. Mkhambathi Falls is one, and it is also the most accessible.

It's a few kilometres' easy walk from the reserve's chalets at Gwe-Gwe. Further upstream are the Horseshoe and Strandloper Falls, both of which have massive plunge pools.

All the rivers and streams in the reserve are pure and sweet, and most of the Mkhambathi River's catchment area falls within the reserve. Drinking straight from the rivers is like tasting a bit of paradise. There aren't many rivers left in our country that have not been polluted.

The entire coastline from the Mzimvubu River at Port St Johns to the Mzamba River near Port Edward is a marine protected area – one of the largest in SA. Mkhambathi lies in the middle of it.

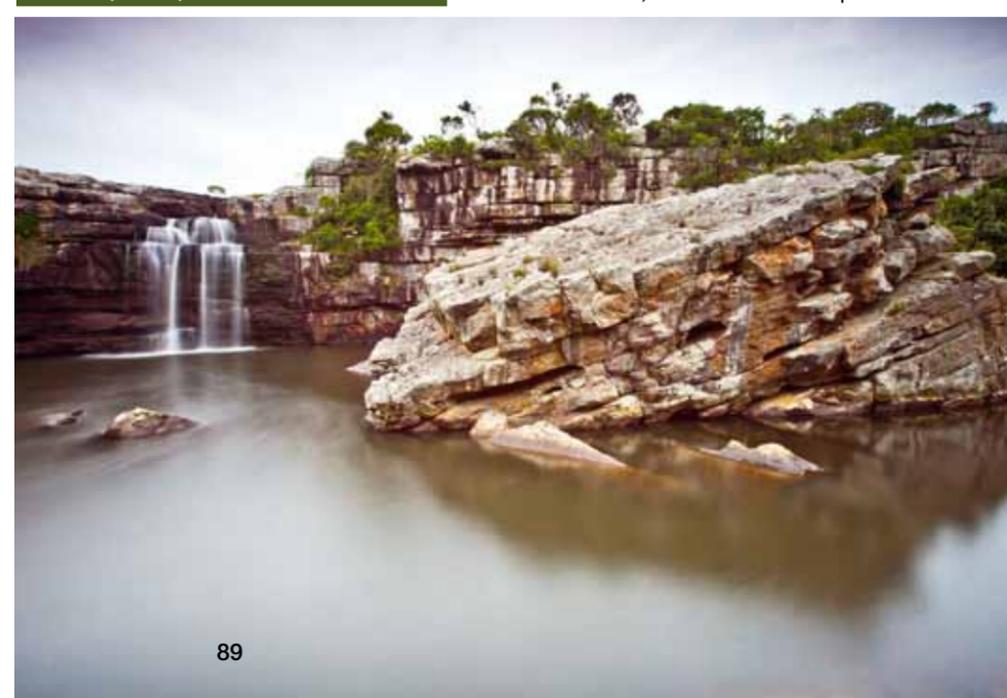
And it's one of the most important protected ocean areas, because almost every year the largest animal migration on earth takes place in its waters. In winter, millions of sardines get trapped in a counter current of cold water that flows north-east along the Wild Coast and into KwaZulu-Natal. Following this moving feast are thousands of sharks, dolphins, Bryde's whales and predatory fish such as garrick, barracuda and cob.

Few people have experienced the spectacle like John Costello, a Wild Coast denizen and regular visitor to Mkhambathi. He has followed the sardines in his boat or by helicopter every year since 1960, when he moved to Port St Johns, photographing the enormous shoals stretching up to 20km.

Flying over the reserve, John once spotted a man in a canoe near the mouth of the



Top: A Lunar blister beetle on an everlasting flower. Middle: A handful of num-num berries, from the *Carissa macrocarpa* bush, which grows along the Pondoland coast. The berries are sought after by locals who value their taste and nutrition. Below: Yet another beautiful waterfall, Strandloper Falls is a short walk up from Mkhambathi Falls, and makes for a fantastic picnic spot.



Msikaba. He was surrounded by a huge grey mass of marine animals.

"At first I thought they were sardines," John chuckled, "but as I flew closer I realised they were sharks – thousands of sharks! The man was totally oblivious to what lay beneath him."

But there are other things to look out for, especially if you go scuba diving in the sardine shoal. "Your biggest danger doesn't necessarily come from sharks but from Bryde's whales," John explained. "They come up through the shoal from below with their huge mouths open, and if you happen to be in the middle, the whale will accidentally swallow you whole!"

During the rest of the year, schools of kingfish and other species move up and down the estuaries and rivers. Fishing here is controlled, and the Pondoland Marine Protected Area has done much to conserve the abundant marine life. But there's still much to be done. Enforcement is difficult.

There is just one rubber duck and a few rangers to patrol 90kms of protected coastline, extending 15km out to sea.

But although there is some illegal fishing, this is a largely pristine place. Mkhambathi and its shoreline represent what most of the east coast looked like a few hundred years ago – wildlife sharing their space with local people, who lived a life deeply connected to the rhythms of nature.

Incredibly, Mkhambathi was used as a leper colony for several decades up to the 1950s. Today, the local Pondo community owns the reserve and leases the land to the Eastern Cape Parks & Tourism Agency.

But like many pristine areas, Mkhambathi is under threat. The curse of unchecked commerce and development is lurking. For several years the Pondo people and organisations such as Sustaining the Wild Coast have been fighting mining companies that want to strip the sands and soils of titanium. However, under the leadership



Above: The so-called “Superbowl” in the west of the reserve is one of the most impressive natural features I have seen on my Year in the Wild journey. Below: Mkhambathi is at the centre of a biodiversity hotspot, the Maputaland-Pondoland-Albany area, which not only hosts the most number of tree species for a temperate region, but also contains some plants with beautiful, fascinating flowers. From top left – *Thunbergia atriplicifolia*. Top right - *Dissotis canescens*. Bottom left - *Geranium ornithopodon*. Bottom right - *Ipomoea crassipes* (Thank you to local botanist Tony Abbott for identifying these. If you’re interested in a guided tour of the Wild Coast’s botanical wonders, contact Tony on [tabbott@venturenet.co.za](mailto:tabbott@venturenet.co.za))



of King Mpondombini Sigcau, the Pondo people have forbidden mining.

I spent a weekend with local guide and environmental educator Nonhle Mbuthuma while she was conducting a workshop for local children at Mtentu, on the north-eastern border of the reserve. “Mining would destroy the rivers and destroy the grasslands for our cattle,” she said.

On top of that, the proposed mine would operate for just 20-odd years, but it could ruin the aesthetic value of the land forever.

“Most of the mining jobs would be for outsiders, and most of the money would end up in the bank accounts of a few individuals,” said Nonhle. “What are we supposed to do once the mine has destroyed our land?” She feared that income currently generated from nature tourism would – like the rivers – dry up.

There’s no doubt that Mkhambathi and its marine protected area could become one of SA’s flagship reserves, taking its place alongside the likes of Table Mountain National Park and the Kruger National Park. This would be no mean feat for a tiny reserve, yet its preservation remains uncertain.

I challenge anyone to come to Mkhambathi and to tell me that the authorities should not do everything in their power to conserve it.

“Mkhambathi is one of the few parts of the east coast that is unspoiled by man,” says Abbott. “The whole Wild Coast was once like this. It’s unbelievably beautiful. If you have a soul at all, you will appreciate it. It’s humbling in its diversity of life, and good for the spirit just to be here.”

#### GETTING THERE

Mkhambathi lies on the north-eastern Wild Coast, between Port St Johns and Port Edward. If you’re coming from

Durban, turn south off the N2 onto the R626. Then take the R61 south to Flagstaff. From there, follow the signs to Holy Cross and Mkhambathi.

If you’re coming from Port St Johns, follow the R61 north to Lusikisiki and then turn right to Holy Cross and follow the signs to Mkhambathi.

If you’re coming from Port Edward, follow the R61 south to Holy Cross. The last 33km from Holy Cross are gravel and in poor condition, with lots of potholes.

The roads in this part of the Eastern Cape are

indeed shocking, so it will take longer than you expect to cover the distances.

In the reserve, the roads are really tracks, so you must have a bakkie or high-ground clearance vehicle.

Also, bring enough food for your stay. Accommodation facilities are basic but adequate.

There is little cell phone reception. The staff are among the friendliest I have met, and reserve manager Vuyani Mapiya is helpful and informative.



Mkhambathi offers spectacular views wherever you look. Here, my Everest takes a break from all the hard driving near the Msikaba river mouth at the southern end of the reserve.



Top: Gwe-Gwe beach’s basic chalets are adequate for adventurous travellers, with their location being one of the finest in the country’s protected areas. Middle: The Msikaba River gorge hosts one of the largest local breeding colonies of Cape vultures, which visitor can watch from the edge of the cliffs. Above: With coastlines in south-eastern Africa undergoing degradation and development, sightings of eland against the backdrop of the Indian Ocean are quite rare.

#### ACCOMMODATION AND CONTACTS

In Mkhambathi, the self-catering cottage at **Gwe-Gwe River Lodge** is fully equipped and sleeps up to 20 people. It costs from R1820 to R2060 for up to 10 people (R180 to R200 for each additional person).

Each of the seven rondavels at **Gwe-Gwe Beach**, a little downstream from the lodge, has spectacular views. The rondavels sleep two people and have a gas stove, shower, fridge and freezer, but you must take your own cutlery and crockery. Costs are R320 to R350 a unit a night. Contact Eastern Cape Parks & Tourism to book, tel 043-701-9600, e-mail [reservations@ecparks.co.za](mailto:reservations@ecparks.co.za), [www.ecparks.co.za](http://www.ecparks.co.za). The reserve office number is 039-306-9000.

The privately run **Mtentu River Lodge** just across the northern border of the reserve has a backpacker’s feel about it and offers simple but comfortable cabins, as well as a restaurant and bar. Accommodation starts from R600 a cabin a night. Cellphone number is 083-234-0436; e-mail [reservations@mtenturiverlodge.co.za](mailto:reservations@mtenturiverlodge.co.za), [www.mtenturiverlodge.co.za](http://www.mtenturiverlodge.co.za).

For a guided tour of the reserve and surrounding Pondoland, contact Nonhle Mbuthuma on tel 076-359-2982 or e-mail [nonhlem@vodamail.co.za](mailto:nonhlem@vodamail.co.za). If you’re passing through Port St Johns and considering a guided tour of the Wild Coast, contact John Costello on tel 082-550-5430 or e-mail [costello@wildcoast.co.za](mailto:costello@wildcoast.co.za).

For information on Pondoland’s Marine Protected Area, go to [www.wwf.org.za](http://www.wwf.org.za).

**Year in the Wild is supported by Total, Ford, EeziAwn, Frontrunner, National Luna, Goodyear, Evosat, Vodacom, Digicape, Lacie, Garmin, Hetzner, K-Way, Cape Union Mart and Conqueror Trailers.**

For more blogs and photos uploaded via Evosat, go to [www.yearinthewild.com](http://www.yearinthewild.com) and [ww.facebook.com/yearinthewild](http://ww.facebook.com/yearinthewild).

My Ford Everest 4x4 excelled on the bad roads of the Eastern Cape, and on the tracks at Mkhambathi. Long distance cruising on tar roads is a pleasure, but the vehicle comes into its own on bad gravel roads and 4x4 tracks, when it morphs into a very capable 4x4 that makes driving easy.

I have now driven thousands of kilometres across SA and the Ford always feels safe and solid, even with an EeziAwn rooftop tent on top, and fully-loaded with all my gear.

People sometimes ask how they can contribute to conservation in SA. The easiest way is to travel to the region’s national parks and nature reserves! The money you spend on accommodation, activities and basics such as food and supplies will go some way to creating a sustainable industry from nature tourism.

There is pressure to provide more jobs, and unless nature reserves can sustain themselves financially, government may turn more to industries such as mining, even in sensitive areas. This would be tragic for a fragile place like Mkhambathi.

So next time you’re looking for a holiday destination, choose a national park or nature reserve in SA. Not only can you enjoy some of the most diverse and beautiful scenery and wildlife on earth but you will also be contributing directly to its preservation. Go to [www.sanparks.org.za](http://www.sanparks.org.za), [www.capenature.co.za](http://www.capenature.co.za), [www.kznwildlife.com](http://www.kznwildlife.com), [www.isimangaliso.com](http://www.isimangaliso.com) and [www.ecparks.co.za](http://www.ecparks.co.za).

