

SLOW FOOT

A quest to photograph all the chameleon species in South Africa uncovered a conservation conundrum.
By Morgan Trimble



ACTUAL SIZE: 35 cm

FIND THEM HERE

Kruger National Park and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park Flap-necked chameleon (*Chamaeleo dilepis*). Search the rest camps at night or keep your eyes peeled on a night drive.

Chameleons have eyes that work independently to give a near-360-degree view, a ballistic tongue clocking speeds of 20 km/h, sets of fused fingers and toes for a tight grip, a prehensile tail, and specialised skin cells that create dynamic colourations. Yet many of these charmingly elusive creatures evade attention from nature lovers.

“It’s hard not to love the little things,” said lifelong reptile enthusiast Tyrone Ping, who started photographing reptiles in the field in his mid-20s and soon noticed there weren’t a lot of photographs of chameleons. He’d trawl the internet and find the common ones but a lot of species were extremely poorly represented.

When he discovered just a single online photo of the endangered Elandsberg dwarf chameleon, he set a challenge for himself, to find and photograph all of South Africa’s chameleons to share online. Remembering his boyhood fascination with reptiles, Tyrone said, “I thought it would be so cool for younger people to actually see photographs of our chameleon species.”

Tyrone’s challenge was no small feat. South Africa is home to 19 species of chameleons including 17 dwarf chameleons (genus *Bradypodion*) and two typical chameleons (genus *Chamaeleo*). Many species occupy extremely limited ranges in tiny pockets of habitat. Besides that, chameleons employ crafty techniques to stay hidden. They have a legendary knack for camouflage and their slow, jerking movements help them disappear amid wind-ruffled foliage.

“No ‘normal’ person had seen them all,” said Tyrone, who works in digital marketing. “Even professional herpetologists sometimes hadn’t seen the more rare ones.” The hardest part was figuring out where to search for each species and working out

the logistics. “As a student, I had time but no money. When I started working, I had money but no time,” joked Tyrone.

After five years of scouring literature, collecting expert tips, crowdsourcing sightings from social media and criss-crossing the country to search for species, Tyrone finally succeeded. His last quarry was a hard-earned picture of the Qudeni dwarf chameleon from the Nkandla Forest in KwaZulu-Natal.

But Tyrone might need to revisit his chameleon quest soon. There are several new species on the horizon according to Krystal Tolley, chameleon expert at the South African National Biodiversity Institute: “We have about four that we will describe in the next year, and we are still gathering data on two or three others.” Herpetologists have known about them for some time but it takes years of research in genetics and morphology to understand which truly represent new species and to describe them scientifically.

While the two ‘typical’ chameleon species in South Africa, the flap-necked and Namaqua, also occur beyond our borders, the 17 ‘dwarf’ chameleons and the handful of yet-to-be-described species are endemics. With a rich concentration of endemic chameleons comes a serious conservation responsibility. The IUCN’s Red List designates 10 of the 17 described dwarf chameleons as endangered, vulnerable or near threatened.

The biggest challenge? Habitat loss. The tiny distributional ranges of many species, especially those that don’t overlap with conservation areas, put them at risk. Krystal explained: “About half of South Africa’s chameleons are considered well protected by our protected area network, with much of the protection under provincial reserves. About one-quarter are considered poorly protected and most of these are in



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Monks Cowl Nature Reserve and Golden Gate National Park

Drakensberg Dwarf Chameleon (*B. dracomontanum*). Search the long grass growing next to the roads.

Kamberg Nature Reserve

Emerald Dwarf Chameleon (not yet formally described).

Look in the reedbeds along rivers and dams.



Garden Route National Park

Knysna Dwarf Chameleon (*B. damaranum*).

They’re easier to find in the summer months.

In winter, they hide in leaf litter to escape the cold.



FIND THEM HERE

Agulhas and Bontebok National Parks and Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve

Little Karoo dwarf chameleon (*B. gutturale*). Look in dry, scrubby trees.

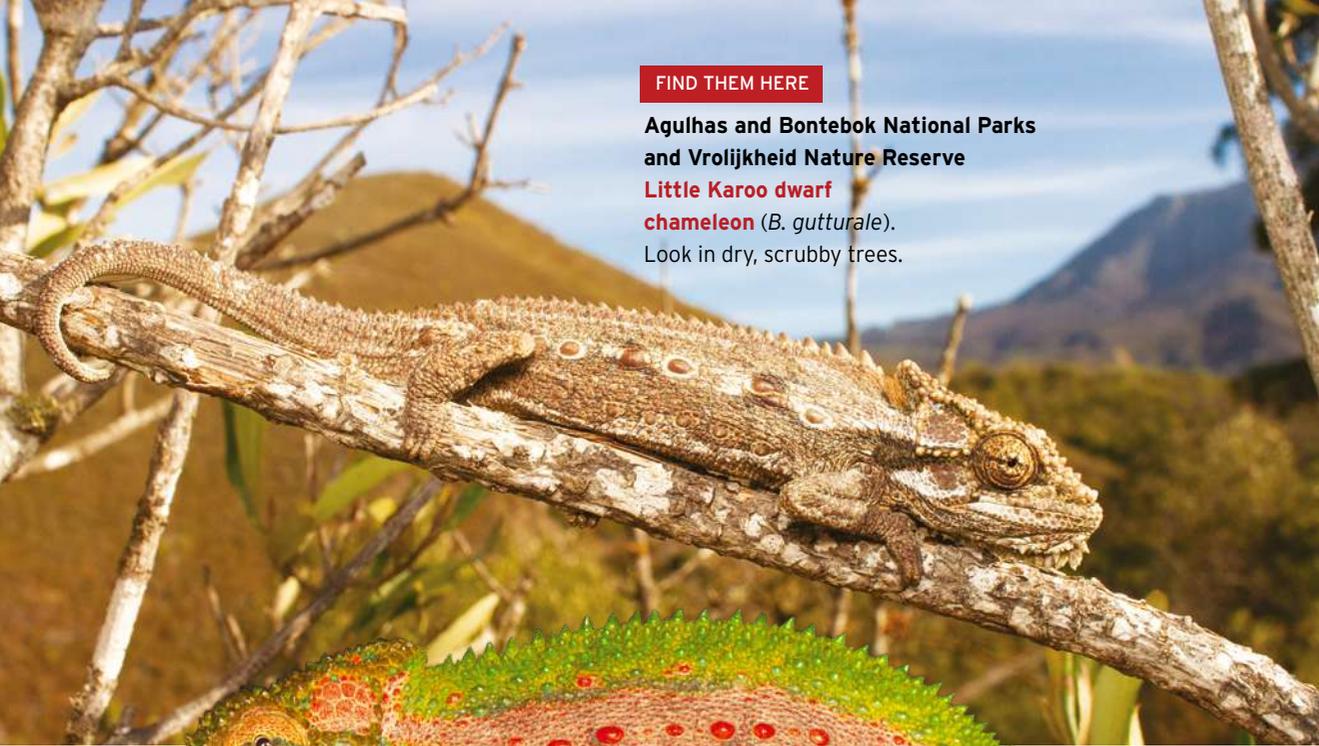


Table Mountain National Park **Cape dwarf chameleon** (*B. pumilum*). Comb the bush, especially restios, on the lower slopes where it's less windy.

CONSERVATION

Swartberg Nature Reserve
Swartberg dwarf chameleon (*B. atromontanum*). Look in fine-leaved bushes in the montane fynbos, particularly among restios and daisies.



West Coast National Park
Western dwarf chameleon (*B. occidentale*). Search the restio vegetation at viewpoints.



Grootvadersbosch Nature Reserve **Bradypodion sp** (not yet formally described). At night, search small branches of forest trees overhanging the paths.

HERPER
 { Reptile and amphibian enthusiast. You'll hear this term on internet forums and among reptile hobbyists. }

the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.”

Illegal collection from the wild for the pet trade poses another threat. “Don't buy a chameleon,” pleaded Tyrone. “And if you find a chameleon crossing a road, the worst thing you can do is take it home thinking it can live nicely among the rose bushes.” It's unlikely to survive but if it does, you risk contaminating the gene pool or creating an alien population.

“Chameleons are delicate animals. If

you handle them in an incorrect way, you can break their ribs quite easily. They also get very stressed,” said Tyrone. If you must help a chameleon safely cross a road, Tyrone advised letting it crawl onto your open palm and depositing it gently in the nearest bush.

Tyrone's next challenge is completing a book about his chameleon quest. “It actually feels more difficult than finding the chameleons in the first place!” he confessed. 🐾

TYRONE PING'S QUEST **5 YEARS**

- ✈️ 2 international flights
- ✈️ 8 domestic flights
- 📍 17 road trips
- 📍 4 provinces
- 38 402 KM AIR & ROAD TRAVEL**
- 📷 1000s OF PHOTOGRAPHS



TIPS FOR A CHAMELEON HUNT

- Search at night with a strong torch when chameleons are asleep. The colouration of their relaxed bodies reflects pale white in the torchlight. They stand out once you know what to look for.
- Search branch tips. Chameleons often crawl right to the end of a branch. If a predator, such as a snake, approaches, the shaking branch cues the chameleon to drop to the ground to escape.
- Consult the *Chameleons of Southern Africa* guidebook to get a feel for their favoured habitat. “Think about their little feet and what size branches they'll be on. They'll be in a nice tree with lots of fine little branches,” suggests reptile enthusiast Tyrone Ping.
- It's much more difficult to find chameleons during the day. Sometimes they use a path to move between bushes, so keep an eye on the trail when hiking.
- It's easier to find chameleons in the summer. In the cold, they venture into the thicker sections of the bush.
- To snap the perfect chameleon photo, “never touch or mess around with them”, advises Tyrone. A stressed chameleon will lose its natural colouration, turn dark, hiss and even try to bite. “When I find a sleeping chameleon, I gently blow on the animal. They wake up, open their eyes, I snap the picture and leave.”



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