



ORNITHOLIDAY

Through the lens of birding, and a pair of binoculars, there's plenty to discover in the smallest national park. **By Morgan Trimble**



One of Bontebok's inviting wooden chalets.

A hulking black bird leapt from its vantage point on a utility pole in the fynbos-carpeted Bontebok National Park. With powerful wingbeats, the raptor accelerated, gaining elevation over the short vegetation below. My partner cut the engine of our vehicle, just in time to lock binoculars onto the bird before it swooped behind rolling hills. A flash of white on the bird's rump signalled we'd found one of our quarries for the weekend, a black harrier. It was the second new tick for our bird lists in our first afternoon at Bontebok, and we were giddy.

Minutes earlier, as we rolled slowly along the park's only game drive loop, we were happily startled by another new-to-us species. We flushed a Denham's bustard hidden among the erica shrubs a few metres from the road. The bird exploded out of the bush, feverishly flapping wings as long as my arms to get its four-kilogram body aloft. The sight was something akin to a bowling ball unexpectedly taking flight.

Will travel for birds

I never expected to be this person, a 'birder'. Travelling in the Lowveld years ago, I remember begging, pejoratively, "Come on bird

nerds, can't we please look for lions?", as my friends peered into an unremarkable bush for what felt like hours, waiting in vain for something called a twinspot to emerge.

As I spent more time with birders, I began to appreciate the diversity of species, their ecological roles, unique personalities and, most importantly, the challenge and sense of accomplishment in finding and identifying them. I caught the birding bug. Now, I'm loath to be without binoculars. I keep species lists, both digital and hard copy, just in case, and I plan entire holidays around birding.

That's how we found ourselves in Bontebok for a long weekend. It's tiny, the smallest national park in South Africa covering 3 500 hectares, and it's far from an untouched wilderness. For millennia, people have inhabited this region. The Big Five are long gone, and the impact of humans in the surrounding landscape is visible from every hilltop.

To the north is Swellendam, nestled at the foot of the Langeberg. To the south is the Breede River, alongside which the Hessequa Khoe Khoe grazed their long-horn cattle and fat-tailed sheep for much of the past 2 000 years. All around the park, farms sprawl over a scarred landscape, testifying to the fertility of ▶

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ALOE, ARE YOU THERE? Scouring the veld for new ticks while on the Aloe Hill Trail, a 3,3 km self-guided walk with stunning views.

this belt of fynbos and renosterveld and, consequently, its extreme scarcity.

Bontebok National Park may be small, but it's a giant in terms of rarity. In the early 1800s when only 17 bontebok had escaped conspicuous overhunting, a few forward-thinking Overberg farmers set aside land for a sanctuary. Government proclaimed the national park in 1931 and when the original sanctuary near Bredasdorp proved inadequate for the growing herd, the park was moved to its current setting. Eighty-six years and one location change later, we sat on a Saturday morning, enjoying the beauty of these handsome antelope. A small group of bontebok, coats gleaming purplish in the warm morning sun, galloped single file over a ridge to join a hundred-strong herd in the valley below. In the distance, we spotted a group of rare Cape mountain zebra. And, although I couldn't name them, I know the surrounding bush harbours exceptional plant species, some of which grow nowhere else.

Later, on our game drive, we stopped to study an LBJ or Little Brown Job, the term for any smallish, brownish, difficultish to identify bird, flitting among the fynbos. Another vehicle approached from the rear, and I braced myself for the usual exchange.

"What do you see?"

"We're looking at a bird."

Disappointed sigh followed by hasty departure that sends the bird in question flying for cover.

Instead, the three passengers in the other vehicle took an interest in our LBJ and confessed

they were searching for a Denham's bustard. I explained where we'd seen one the previous afternoon and confided that we were hoping for a southern black korhaan.

As they pulled away, the woman in the back seat poked her head out the window to yell, "Good luck! Good hobby!", apparently surprised to meet young birders.

The unlikeliest craze of the year?

In this, my partner and I are not alone. Recently, *Condé Nast Traveller* declared bird-watching the unlikeliest craze of the year. Millennials are adopting a hobby stereotypically confined to retirees in wide-brimmed hats and rumpled khaki garb, a specimen we spotted exploring one of Bontebok's trails.

But is the growing interest in birding so unlikely? I was in America for the onset of Pokémon Go mania last year. People of every age and background were out scouring usually deserted neighbourhoods for species of the Pokémon world such as Pikachu and Charmanders. The groundbreaking 'augmented reality' game uses the GPS and camera of a player's phone to let them search the real world for virtual Pokémon, which occur somewhat randomly, but according to habitat preferences. The ultimate goal is to capture every species.

Sound familiar? Birders know in their bones what game developers study psychology to learn. For the human psyche, searching is irresistible, especially when success comes only occasionally and combines both skill and luck. Whether the target is Pokémon, antiques, ▶



1 A Cape longclaw perches on a sugar-bush. 2 With their gleaming coats, bontebok must count among the most attractive antelope. 3 A Karoo scrub robin. 4 The park has several marked hiking trails, exploring different environments. 5 The bold yellow of a Cape weaver.

BEGINNING BIRDING

Every birder needs a comprehensive field guide. *Roberts Bird Guide* and *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* are classics. Each has a mobile app with handy features such as bird calls and sorting by location, but for beginners, the physical book is easier to browse. Books such as *Game Drive Birds of Southern Africa*, *Southern African Birdfinder* and *300 Easy-to-See Birds* help with planning outings.

The nearly 1000 species of birds in southern Africa present a daunting challenge at first, but with practice, it becomes easy to assign a mystery bird to a type based on shape and size and go from there. For example, is that yellow bird a weaver or a canary? It's best to join experienced birders when starting out, but photographing birds and identifying them later is a good way to learn.

| BONTEBOK NATIONAL PARK |

buried treasure, bargains or, indeed, birds, the act of seeking and finding triggers a dopamine hit in the brain. In Bontebok, the prospect of a dopamine hit propelled us out of bed before sunrise on a Sunday to explore the Bushbuck Trail, a beautiful meander along the Breede River among aloes, reed-beds and riverine woodland made even more attractive by the idea that a flufftail could emerge around any turn.

Dopamine is what has me continuously raising my binoculars to anything that moves, even when I'm trying to relax on the serene stoep of a chalet in Bontebok's rest camp, lest I miss a new species. In the fading sunlight of our last evening in the park, I glanced up from my book and saw the dark form of a common moorhen settle on a pool of the river far below. To double check, I squinted through my binoculars. For an instant, I was eye to eye with, not a moorhen, but an otter, which soon vanished under the surface. The rewards of birding extend far beyond tick marks on a list. 🐾



See the complete checklist for the long weekend's birding at Bontebok National Park on www.wildcard.co.za

Bontebok National Park lies next to Swellendam. Follow the N2 east out of Cape Town for 220 km.



TRIP PLANNER

Day visitors Enjoy a riverside braai and a dip in the Breede River at the new Die Stroom picnic site.

Conservation fees R40 an adult, R20 a child, valid *Wild Card* members free.

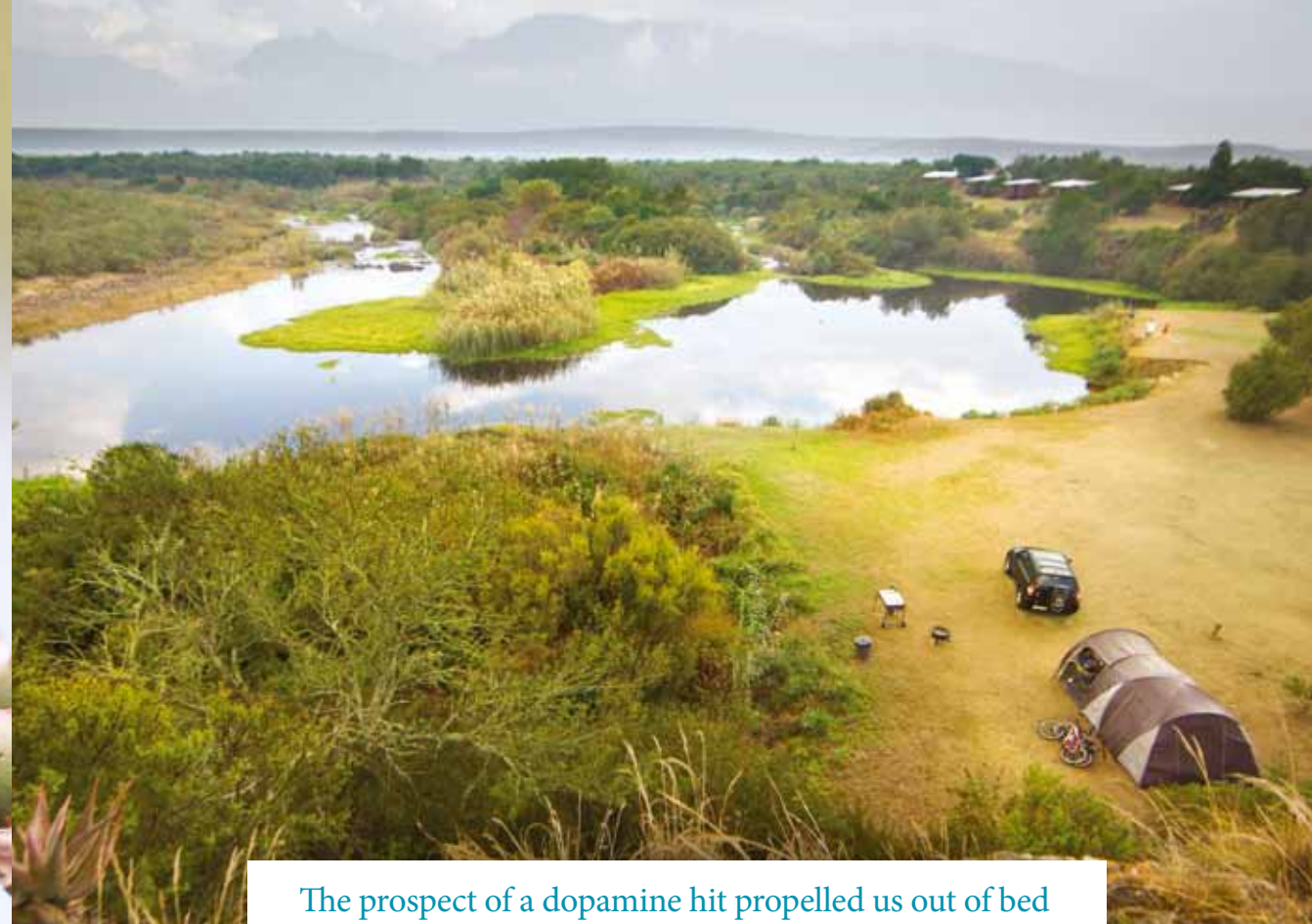
Accommodation Lang Elsie's Kraal rest camp features beautiful chalets perched on a high bank overlooking the Breede River, from R1135 a night for two guests. Camping starts at R225 for one or two people, R88 an extra adult, R44 an extra child.

Bookings SANParks Central Reservations 012-428-9111, www.sanparks.org



The unmistakable African hoopoe.

Birdwatch by day, stargaze by night.



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CAMPERS' DREAM
There is a campsite conveniently located next to the Breede River. These sites don't have electricity.