

de hoop creates hope

Written by: Carrie Hampton Photographs provided by: De Hoop Collection





There are about 1,000 Red-knobbed Coots on De Hoop's vlei, and I'm pretty sure I saw all of them. These feisty little creatures were busy terrorising all other birds that strayed into their nesting territory, scooting menacingly across the water, because they can't be bothered to fly. It was breeding season in De Hoop Nature Reserve and our guide on the four-day De Hoop Collection's Vlei to Whales Trail, Eduan Oktober, explained, 'the males with the reddest, shiniest knobs are deemed the most attractive by the females.' The all-women walking group chuckled approvingly.

Coots are the most prolific bird species on De Hoop's wetland, out of an impressive tally of 15,448 birds recorded in the Coordinated Waterbird Count in January 2023. But the prettiest, I think, are the Greater and Lesser Flamingos, for their grace, poise and in-flight flashes of deep pink. They are rivalled only by tiny Malachite Kingfishers, whose iridescent peacock colours are fleeting but dazzling. Birds may not be your bag, but there's no doubting the importance of the large lake and vlei. It's a vital overwintering and migration staging post for threatened bird species and the oldest Ramsar* site in South Africa. While the wetland is a prominent feature of De Hoop, so is the endemic flora and fauna. The reserve is one of 13 protected clusters in the Cape Floral Region World Heritage Site. It contains at least 34 plant species found nowhere else on earth. I find it hard to distinguish one

erica from another, but driving through the reserve, I always get the feeling I've arrived somewhere very special. UNESCO's entry on De Hoop explains: 'It is one of the world's "hottest hotspots" for diversity of endemic and threatened plants.' It smells different too, mixing fynbos earthiness with a salty sea breeze and decomposing pondweed in the brackish lagoon, along with fresh animal dung on the renosterveld scrubland – the kind of odours nature-lovers love.

Endemic bontebok and short, fat Cape mountain zebra are frequently seen roaming around this landscape, as are eland, ostrich, baboon, tortoise and mongoose. Predators like genet and caracal are less conspicuous, and a camera trap set for leopards astonished researchers with a rare albino honey badger. Snakes abound, but are rarely seen, apart from the Cape cobra who lives in the vicinity of the boatyard. >



Red-knobbed Coots
abound on the vlei.







Luxurious De Mond Villa on the Vlei to Whales Trail is off-grid and has five bedrooms and a gorgeous pool.

Staff know he's there, but both parties seem to have come to the understanding 'I won't bother you if you don't bother me.'


If it's winter, it's whale season, and I advise you to book your De Hoop Collection accommodation early. The reason is simple. The viewpoint at Koppie Alleen – and the whole De Hoop Nature Reserve coastline – is one of the best land-based whale-watching destinations in the world. Binoculars are essential, but marine conservation photographer Jean Tresfon had the supreme view during an official aerial survey in the Southern Right whale breeding season of 2023. He commented: 'There were so many whales that counting was an exercise in itself, and to complicate matters, an enormous pod of bottlenose dolphins chose that moment to charge through the nursery grounds and play with the whale calves! The final number was 472 whales (of which 236 were calves) in the bay at Koppie Alleen, and another 115 whales (57 calves) counted along the rest of the De Hoop coastline.'

The dunes behind Koppie Alleen are impressively large, formed by persistent wind and shifting sands that cut off the Sout River from the ocean about 200 years ago. I set my sights on some sandboarding on any slippery material that came to hand. This was denied by Eddy, as it's almost certainly not allowed by CapeNature, who manage the reserve. It's the De Hoop Collection, however, who market and operate many of the numerous accommodation options in the reserve and all the activities and conferencing. They recruit and train staff almost exclusively from local towns like Napier and Bredasdorp, and give so much scope for advancement that staff stay for years. Always with an eye to celebrating not just the nature, but the stories and history of the area, the De Hoop Collection recently opened the beautifully curated 'Origins of Early Southern Sapiens Behaviour' exhibition in one of the oldest buildings, and this is well worth a visit. De Hoop clearly appeals to international visitors, judging by the different languages floating around the popular Fig Tree Restaurant overlooking the lake, but locals have a special place in

their hearts for this reserve too.

One of the most popular activities is a guided boat trip around the 19km-long lake, and visitors are often blessed with sightings of Cape clawless otters, listed by the IUCN Red List** as Near Threatened. 'Our otters are quite bold,' said our skipper. 'One even bagged a ride on the transom,' he pointed to the flat bit at the back of the boat. Scanning the surface for otter movement, my eye was caught by a pair of Great Crested Grebes. Their numbers here are nearly four times the threshold Ramsar considers as being of international importance at a single site. Their springtime courtship involves synchronised head-flicking and a gravity-defying weed dance, performing a pirouette while walking on water. Eddy likens it to human courtship: 'Go on a date, have dinner, dance a bit, and weyhey! They're off!'

I've unwittingly slipped back to the topic of birds, not because I'm an avid twitcher, but because they provide so much entertainment at De Hoop. Cape Vultures, for example, whose only colony in the Western Cape is near the start of the Whale Trail, were formerly listed as Threatened, but have improved to Vulnerable status through conservation and education. All it takes to see them is a 1km uphill hike to the viewing platform. Easier said than done, and I won't admit how many times I needed to stop and catch my breath. All worth it to see these graceful creatures flying above and below and through the ravine. My new binoculars had no trouble seeking out those sitting on nest sites in the gorge ahead, hoping that the single fledgling succeeds in its inaugural flight from its high rocky ledge.

This excursion, along with the boat trip and guided marine walk, is included in the Vlei to Whales Trail, or bookable when staying in any of the De Hoop Collection accommodations or on day trips. The trail is a fully catered meander through De Hoop over four days, based each night in the luxurious five-roomed De Mond Villa, or sometimes Melkkamer Manor House. My extortionately expensive binoculars proved their worth, and I sat in the gorgeous lounge bathed in golden evening light, watching those frisky little coots darting about until late in the evening. 

*A Ramsar site is a wetland site designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, also known as 'The Convention on Wetlands', an international environmental treaty signed on 2 February 1971 in Ramsar, Iran, under the auspices of UNESCO.

**The International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species.



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WASABI IN OUR SUSHI?



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GETTING
THINNER?



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BLACK MADONNA?

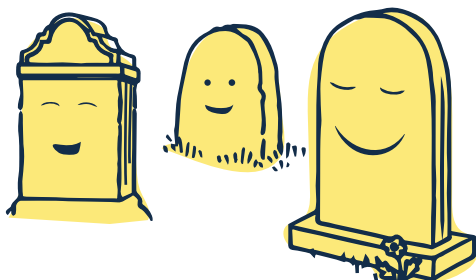


WERE
BASOTHO PONIES
USED
IN THE
CHARGE OF
THE LIGHT
BRIGADE?



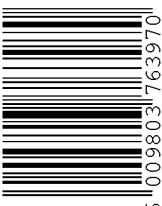
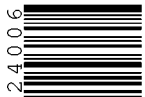
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