

[secret destinations]

The central complex at Doornkop

CHRIS MEINTJES (2)

# doornkop

Doornkop Fish and Wildlife Reserve is set within a valley surrounded by the rolling hillsides of the eastern escarpment of Mpumalanga, between the towns of Machadodorp and Carolina. This is a region of seasonal extremes, ranging from chilly winters that dust the landscape with frost every morning to hot summer days that often culminate in dramatic thunderstorms.

Doornkop is a 2 000-hectare reserve, with stone-and-thatch chalets designed to blend with the natural colours of the landscape. In most cases, the chalets are large family homes, with spacious bedrooms kitted out with warm duvets and woollen blankets for cold winter nights, and wide sliding doors to let in cool summer breezes. Each self-contained chalet has a kitchenette, equipped with a stove, and an outdoor braai area. The central block has the reception and lounge areas, a cosy pub and a restaurant that serves good country fare. There is a warm spa pool, as well as a conventional swimming pool.

The primary attraction of Doornkop is fly-fishing, and there is a range of trout dams that also hold yellowfish. Each dam is situated

near the river and has spectacular views of the mountains. Other activities include horse trails, mountain biking and walking trails which lead to lookouts, waterfalls and, in one case, some iron-age ruins. But naturally, in addition to all this, there is much to entice and interest birdwatchers.

Doornkop offers classic Highveld birding with most of the high-altitude grassland, wetland and rocky ridge species being present in the reserve or nearby. Among these are several species endemic to South Africa, such as Barrow's Korhaan, Buff-streaked Chat, Cape Grassbird and Drakensberg Prinia.

The strident duets of Bokmakieries echo across the valleys, and these atypically bold bush-shrikes might be regarded as the totem birds of Doornkop. Habitats here include perennial rivers (the Komati and Swartspruit), grassy hillsides dotted with bush clumps, rocky hilltops and wooded kloofs. All are accessible on walking trails or vehicle tracks, some of which are only suitable for 4x4s.

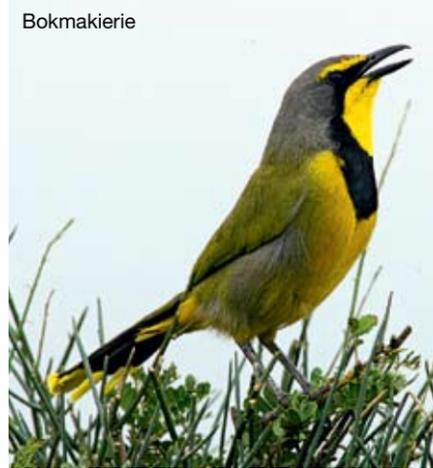
Snaking its way through the valley, the Swartspruit is a true bubbling brook, flanked with tall grass and scattered star-apple

shrubs. Pausing at one of the stone-bed causeways or walking quietly upstream offers an excellent chance of an encounter with the splendid Half-collared Kingfisher. Darting up and down the stream like electric-blue arrows, these dashing birds employ the classic 'wait-and-plunge' hunting technique, either from an exposed root or branch or a large river stone. Along with the larger Giant Kingfisher, pairs of Half-collared occupy linear territories and excavate their nesting burrows in the riverbanks. White-throated



Half-collared Kingfisher

TREVOR HARDAKER



Bokmakierie

ALBERT FRONEMAN

Swallow, African Black Duck and Cape Wag-tail also frequent the stream, while Cape Grassbird and Common Waxbill are at home in the rank waterside growth.

The hillsides support a host of species that are more or less conspicuous depending on the season. A good variety of birds can be seen or heard while relaxing on the chalet porch or taking a short walk. Red-throated Wryneck, Buffy Pipit, Cape Longclaw, Cape Canary and African Hoopoe favour exposed areas, while Red-winged Starling, Speckled Pigeon, Greater Striped Swallow, Rock Martin and Familiar Chat may make their homes on the chalet roofs, porches or even the brick braai sites. Drakensberg Prinia, Streaky-headed Seedeater, Fiscal Flycatcher and Cape Robin-Chat are among the birds that like a little cover.

A good way to begin or end the day is to drive to the lookout point on the Champagne Circle. Barrow's Korhaan inhabits these high



Swartspruit

grasslands, and it is quite an experience to see a pair of these small bustards fly by while barking out their call. Also to be found here are Red-winged Francolin, Long-billed Pipit, Buff-streaked Chat and Jackal Buzzard.

Numerous species of pipits, larks and cisticolas are recorded from the Doornkop valley, so there is much to motivate birders looking for a challenge. Among the pipit possibilities is the much sought-after but little-known Short-tailed Pipit, which may be one of South Africa's more difficult 'ticks'.

The trout dams are attended by all the usual suspects, including Reed and White-breasted cormorants and Egyptian Goose, as well as the ever-spectacular African Fish-Eagle. Migratory Osprey may put in an occasional appearance during summer, when many a fisherman must surely be distracted by the prowess of this piscivorous raptor.

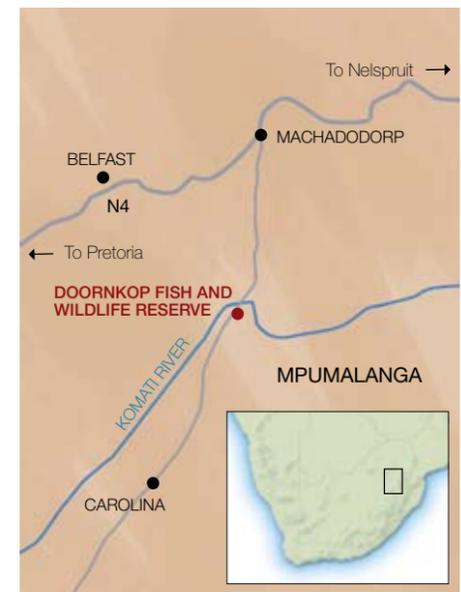
If you spend more than a couple of nights at Doornkop, it is worthwhile venturing beyond the reserve and out onto the country roads. Pans and dams attract a good variety of waterfowl and waders, while kestrels, buzzards and other raptors forage along roadsides and in farm fields. Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Crane and Secretarybird are not uncommon, while grasslands support different communities of pipits, larks and cisticolas.

In addition to the birds, a range of large mammals has been introduced to Doornkop, with blesbok, black wildebeest and eland among the herbivores that would have occurred naturally. Mountain reedbuck, grey duiker, black-backed jackal and Cape clawless otter are resident in suitable habitats.



Cape Grassbird

WARWICK TARBOTON



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