

## Take a Guided Walk on Wolwekraal Nature Reserve

Ailsa Tudhope

Recently my daughter and her partner from the UK visited us and I found myself looking at Prince Albert and the surrounding countryside through their eyes. We traversed the Swartberg Pass, walked Gordon's Koppie, visited the Art Gallery and Fransie Pienaar Museum and spent two hours in the Wolwekraal Nature Reserve with Dr Sue Dean, walking the path established by two Nelson Mandela University interns, Willem Matthee and Sade Cowley, in 2010. Willem is now a lecturer at Saasveld.

March delivered hot days, but we were up bright and early, and we appreciated the changing light as we made our way to the start of the trail. Two other guests accompanied us and our small group set out across the veld from a borrow pit where the roads department had removed fill for the gravel roads. The geology is varied and we crossed shale, sand and river-rolled cobblestones as we moved through the landscape.

The plant life on what appears, at first sight, to be dry, barren land, is diverse and fascinating. Sue showed us plants we might have thought were stones, others have established themselves in the shade of larger plants, relying on their protector's shade and thorns to ensure their survival. Yet others have an off-putting smell or taste. Some have medicinal properties.

We were introduced to both ants and termites and marvelled at their survival strategies and the effect they have on the soil and surrounding plants. We saw aardvark burrows, which offer shelter to other small mammals. The movement-operated cameras on Wolwekraal have captured a variety of animals and birds from korhaans to bat-eared foxes, porcupine and duiker.

Throughout the walk Sue drew our attention to the way people have left their mark on the land and altered the landscape, usually to the detriment of the indigenous fauna and flora.

We crossed the site of a Khoekhoe kraal, some 300 years old and saw the *lammerskraal* where the goat kids and calves would be enclosed at night, only released after their mothers had been milked in the morning. Clay pot fragments indicate where the clan lived when they grazed their stock near the river on the site. Tree trunk fence posts from 1910 mark the line along which 20th century farmers enclosed the land. Sue said that the path we were walking had also altered the face of the Karoo and even if left 'unwalked', it would remain evident for years to come.

Modern man's effect on the fragile Karoo is best illustrated in the dry riverbed, caused by the increased human population generally using all the water diverted through the town's furrow system, which has led to some animal and bird species disappearing from the landscape.

Sue and Richard Dean's establishment of the Wolwekraal Nature Reserve serves to protect some of the rare plants and animals in our district and their education programme for children from local schools and those further afield, is providing an opportunity for the next generation to develop an appreciation for the wonders of the fragile Karoo.

I can highly recommend the early morning Wolwekraal Nature Reserve walk, which should be on every visitor's list when coming to Prince Albert. Call 082 770 0206 to make a booking. ●



*The plant life on the walk is diverse and fascinating.  
Photo: Ailsa Tudhope*