

Walking the Bossie Trail in the Karoo National Park

There's something about stepping out into the Karoo on foot that immediately shifts your pace. Suddenly you're no longer looking at the landscape through a car window, you're in it. You hear more, notice more and, apparently, discover that the Karoo in mid-December can still be absolutely freezing.

We arrived armed with our Stanleys filled with nice strong coffee, ready for a morning walk and, hopefully, a bird or two. The morning was cool and misty, which sounds wonderfully atmospheric until you actually step out of the car and realise just how cold that mountain air is.

We started out along the path leading towards the Bossie Trail, stopping, of course, for the obligatory photo at the sign. Dad, meanwhile, was far less interested in documenting the moment.

"No guys, it's freezing out here."

Bearing in mind that we were there in the middle of December, it wasn't quite the weather we had expected. But I suppose that is the thing about being up in the mountains, the mornings have their own ideas about what season it is.

Dad very quickly decided that attempting the walk without a jacket was not one of his better plans, so he headed back to the car to fetch it while the rest of us hung around waiting for him. Once he reappeared, now considerably better prepared for the morning, we crossed the road and made our way onto the footpath itself.

It was easy going, nothing too crazy, and exactly the kind of trail where you can walk without concentrating too much on where you're putting your feet and instead pay attention to what is happening around you.

And that was exactly what we did.

Every so often we stopped simply to listen. Out here, with so little background noise, individual sounds seemed to carry much further. A bird calling somewhere up the slope, the crunch of gravel beneath our shoes, the breeze moving through the vegetation. It's amazing how quickly you start tuning in when there isn't much else competing for your attention.

There were a couple of runners ahead of us on the trail, and at one point we were eagerly waiting for them to make their way back down towards us. We kept expecting them to appear around a bend, but when we looked up again, they had completely disappeared from sight. The only conclusion we could come to was that they had continued along another path higher up towards the base of the mountain.

We, on the other hand, were quite happy with our considerably slower pace.

Eventually, the cold breeze got the better of us and we found a little cove tucked into the rocks where we could shelter for a while. Out came the Stanleys, and there really is something particularly good about strong coffee when your hands are cold and you're sitting somewhere in the middle of the Karoo.

We sat there drinking, watching and, most importantly, listening.

There was one bird in particular that we were hoping to find, the African Rock Pipit.

Luca continued a few hundred metres further up the path while we stayed tucked out of the wind. Not long afterwards, he indicated back to us.

He'd heard it.

Coffee break over.

We briskly made our way up towards him and began listening again. There it was, somewhere out there. Close enough to know that the bird was around, but not close enough to actually see it.

Oh boy. Was this going to be one of those *so close, yet so far* situations?

The African Rock Pipit is exactly the sort of bird that can make you work for it. In rocky mountain habitat, its colouring allows it to disappear remarkably well into its surroundings. Hearing one and actually getting eyes on one are two very different achievements.

For quite some time, we searched.

Eventually, we formulated a new plan. Mom and Dad would head back down the trail, fetch the car from the car park and drive around to meet us at the gate where we would enter the park. Luca and I would continue along the path in the direction from which we had heard the pipit calling.

It seemed sensible enough.

Now we just needed the bird to cooperate.

We continued slowly, stopping and listening, moving a little further and listening again. This is the part of birding that is difficult to explain to anyone who doesn't do it. You can spend an absurd amount of time staring at a patch of rocks because you are absolutely convinced there is a bird somewhere amongst them.

And then suddenly...

Jackpot.

Just as Mom and Dad pulled up at the entrance gate below us, Luca called out.

“Over there!”

I quickly got eyes on the pipit and then tried to help Mom and Dad, who were some distance away, get onto it too. There was a frantic bit of pointing and explaining, the usual “there, by that rock... no, the other rock” sort of birding directions.

Eventually, everyone had it.

African Rock Pipit. Lifer.

Mom and Dad may not be quite as die-hard as Luca and I when it comes to birding, but they certainly know how to capitalise on having Luca’s expertise around when we’re away. If there’s a special bird somewhere nearby, they’re definitely going to try to get it onto their list too.

And somehow, the sighting summed up the whole morning perfectly.

The Bossie Trail hadn’t given us some enormous spectacle. Instead, it had made us slow down and work for something small and understated. The pipit wasn’t flashy. It blended almost perfectly into the rocky landscape, looking as though it had been designed specifically for that little patch of Karoo mountainside.

The longer we had spent walking, the more we had begun noticing that same quiet detail everywhere.

Tiny birds moved low through the vegetation. Insects crossed the sand beneath our feet. Beetles navigated their way between rocks and ants went about their business completely unconcerned by the four humans wandering through their world clutching coffee flasks and searching for a pipit.

Even the plants demanded a closer look. Karoo vegetation can seem sparse from a distance, but at ground level it becomes incredibly intricate. Low-growing plants cling to rocky soil, shaped by heat, cold, wind and very little water. There’s a toughness to the landscape, but there’s also an extraordinary amount of life hidden within it.

Perhaps that was what I enjoyed most about walking the trail. Nothing was handed to us.

You had to stop. You had to listen. You had to look properly.

By the time all four of us had seen the African Rock Pipit, we were more than happy to climb back into the car and continue our drive through the park. The coffee had done its job, the sun was beginning to take some of the bite out of the morning, and we had a new lifer safely added to the list.

As we drove on, the landscape seemed to open up around us again, vast, rugged and ridiculously beautiful. Even after spending time walking through it, I don’t think we ever quite got used to the scale of the place.

The Bossie Trail had shown us a different side of it, though.

From the car, the Karoo impresses you with its vastness. On foot, it draws your attention to everything hiding within that vastness.

Sometimes the best way to understand a landscape isn't to see more of it.

It's simply to slow down enough to notice what was there all along.