

Birding From a Picnic Table: The Unexpected Magic of Bulkraal

Bulkraal Picnic Site is not the sort of place you arrive at expecting a serious birding session. It feels more like somewhere to stretch your legs, unpack a cooler box and let the day slow down for a while. Which is exactly why it reminded me of one of the simplest truths about birding, sometimes the best sightings happen when you stop trying so hard to find them.

When we pulled in, the first thing we noticed was a family making the most of the little swimming pool. Kids were splashing, voices echoed across the picnic area and the whole place had that carefree holiday atmosphere. My immediate thought was, well, that's that then. With that level of noise, surely anything with feathers would have disappeared long before we stepped out of the car.

But we had stopped anyway, so instead of rushing off again, we decided to stay a while.

Luca and I headed off along the paths leading away from the picnic area, hoping to find a few Karoo specials flitting through the scrub. The landscape opened up around us in that wonderfully understated Karoo way, dry grasses, scattered bushes, pale rock and wide stretches of sky. It is the kind of place that can seem quiet at first, until you begin to listen properly.

We stopped for a while to admire the cliffs and simply stood there, saying nothing. In places like that, silence never really feels empty. There is always something happening, a distant call, the rustle of dry vegetation, the faint buzz of insects or the sound of wind moving across the rocks. You can spend ages standing still, listening for a note you recognise or waiting for movement to give away a bird tucked deep inside a bush.

We did not uncover every Karoo special we had hoped for, but the walk had already reminded us that birding is not always about what you manage to tick off. Sometimes it is enough to follow a path, pause beneath a vast sky and allow the landscape to set the pace.

Back at the picnic site, we found a shady table beneath a cluster of trees, welcome relief from the Karoo sun. The air carried that familiar dry, dusty scent of a roadside stop, and for a few minutes we simply enjoyed being still.

One of the things Dad often does whenever we stop somewhere like this is stretch out on one of the picnic benches and look up. Sometimes it is into an endless blue sky, other times through the branches overhead. On this occasion he was sheltered beneath the trees, watching the leaves and branches above him. Before long, with nowhere to be and nothing demanding our attention, he drifted off to sleep. After all, what's the rush?

As we settled into the landscape, the birds seemed to do the same.

The first movement came from the branches above us, then another along the fence line. Calls that had been drowned out when we arrived gradually returned to the background. It was as though the birds had been watching us, waiting to decide whether we really belonged there.

And then curiosity got the better of one particularly bold wagtail.

It hopped confidently onto the bench beside Dad, tilting its head this way and that as if trying to work out this strange creature lying so still beneath the trees. Completely unfazed, it bounced around only a short distance from him, seemingly convinced he posed no threat at all. The little bird was wonderfully inquisitive, hopping around him as though he had simply become another feature of the picnic site.

That simple moment said more than any textbook could. When we stop moving, lower our voices and quietly blend into the landscape, life carries on around us. The birds do not disappear forever, they simply return to what they were doing before we arrived.

The family at the pool continued their afternoon exactly as before, laughing and splashing without the slightest idea of the little encounter unfolding just a few metres away. Somehow, that made it even more special. Birding does not always have to happen from a hide or along a remote wilderness trail. Sometimes it happens from a picnic bench while everyday life carries on around you.

What stayed with me most about Bulkraal was not a rare sighting or another species added to a list. It was the reminder that patience is often rewarded in the quietest ways. Nature does not always reveal itself because we go looking for it. Sometimes it simply waits until we have slowed down enough to become part of the scenery.

Bulkraal did not need to be silent to be magical.

It just needed a little time.