



Conita's Weighty Babies

A woman of many skills – Conita Walker, wife of conservationist Clive, has raised two rhinos and a hippo in her garden

by **Bettie Coetzee** Eight years ago a newly born black rhino was found, abandoned by its mother, in the Lapalala Wilderness Wildlife Sanctuary. The mother had suffered from stress following her translocation from Zululand to the unfamiliar terrain in the Waterberg region.

Conita Walker, wife of internationally renowned conservationist and naturalist Clive Walker, agreed to rear the orphaned rhino after it had spent six months in the Animal Rehabilitation Centre near Pretoria.

"Of course I agreed," she says. "And, yes, it meant goodbye to my house in Johannesburg. The little one would need a full-time mother."

What Conita had agreed to was giving up a comfortable home in the city, with a twice-monthly 'holiday' visit to Lapalala, and making the wilderness her permanent home. She would become a full-time mother again having just seen her two sons in their 20s leave home.

Of course, nobody could have foreseen exactly how intimate and full-time her dedication to the rearing of this new addition to the Walker family would be. Who would have guessed that his 'nursery' would be right next to the house in what was then a flourishing, brightly coloured garden, or the yearning of this 150kg, six-month-old bulk of muscle for close physical contact and cuddling?

Not one for half measures, Conita took her new task seriously. She had read enough about the nature and habits of rhino to know that it wasn't going to be easy but, having brought up two sons, she had an understanding of the needs of children. More than a dollop of commonsense and an active sense of humour equipped her for the task.

"I knew I had to treat this baby black rhino the way I would my own child." She gave orders for the garden to be fenced in with heavy poles. "A child needs a secure space," was her firm conviction. She talked and touched, got into a tree and lured Bwana Tshiwana (respectively

Swahili and Northern Sotho for 'master' and 'orphan') to take tasty sticks and leaves from her.


She then embarked on the arduous task of 'potty training' the nervous young male. "Rhinos are taught from very young by their mothers to 'do their business' in midden areas (bush toilets), and then cover it with dust. When other rhinos visit the area, they go to the same spot." But how do you instil this new habit? Conita found a way. At regular intervals she would lead Bwana out of his camp to a certain spot. Success reigned when, one day, he called her to take him out. "I nearly jumped six feet," Conita still remembers that first victory. After this he would give her a nudge or simply call her.

"Of course I understand his language," Conita answers. With endless patience she has managed to link certain sounds to certain needs. "I can now identify 14 specific, meaningful sounds."

But as if one wasn't enough, Conita took another orphan into her care. Four years ago a female baby white rhino was found in Lapalala, suckling its dead mother. "How could I refuse her?" They called her Munyane (Northern Sotho for 'the little one').

Munyane didn't accept her new mother easily and became very aggressive, injuring herself badly. She also wouldn't drink at all. "We thought we were going to lose her. She simply refused to take a milk bottle."

Experts warned Conita that it is far more difficult to raise a white rhino in captivity than a black rhino. "They cautioned that if Munyane didn't accept me within 10 days, she wouldn't at all. But she did. On the 10th day."

Later I hear of Motlo the hippo, her other 'child', who will be five years old in April. Conita has raised him since he was 10 days old. 

Conita Walker (above) with the white rhino Munyane, who'll be four years old on Valentine's Day. Conita has raised her since she was three months old.

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by **Bettie Coetzee** When bigger means better, and biggest best, scaling down one's vision to the micro-view that birds, bees and the like demand seems almost an insult to the senses. But at Lapalala Wilderness Wildlife Sanctuary, this awareness of the minute intensifies one's experience of the bush. At the same time, however, what is big and wide or forceful demands equal scrutiny. On the one hand then, the eye of a bird, the song of the Oriole. On the other hand, the bulky weight of the rhino.

This 35 350ha wildlife sanctuary is one of the truly wild areas in the country. The overnight camps are both self-catering bush camps (10 in total) and the fully catered, luxury Rhino Camp situated on the banks of the two main rivers, Lephalala and Kgogong, or strategically placed on a high look-out point. A totally different ambience characterises each of these imaginatively designed camps. Sizes vary to accommodate either small groups of two or 16 people at a time.


Activities range from guided walks, game drives on an open vehicle or rides on horseback in the early morning or at sunset. One's own car is left abandoned but safe in the shaded parking at reception for the duration of your stay.

If you're so inclined, you can view nature and her inhabitants in Rhino Camp from the comfort of a bed in a luxury safari tent on a raised wooden platform with stilts. Binocular lenses transport you right into the red eye above the pointed red beak of the Eastern Blackheaded Oriole.

Interest is also provided by the Waterberg Environmental Centre, housed in the restored Melkriver Laerskool, which was built in 1935. This centre comprises the only Rhino Museum in the world devoted solely to this endangered animal, as well as a cultural history museum that documents the lives of humans from the late Stone Age until recently. It also sheds light on the fauna and flora of the area. An art gallery exhibits the work of its founder, conservationist and chairman of the Wilderness Trust, Clive Walker, and other wildlife artists.

Walker's Wayside is a restaurant-bar housed in one of the former classrooms, its front stoep hiding comfortably in the shade of a magnificent weeping Boerbean tree (*Schotia brachypetala*). The original gardens, laid out by *Tant Kindjie* Nel, wife of the second and last headmaster of the school, Jannie Nel, have been faithfully replicated

and have become a veritable bird haven.

Should one wish to hold a meeting at the centre, Walker's Wayside will provide tea and coffee, lunch or dinner. It is also an ideal venue for functions, seminars or workshops. A fully equipped conference room is adjacent to the restaurant. 

PREVIOUS PAGES A peep into the luxury tents and lapa where meals are served by Barbara Miles, the camp manageress.

Under the cool thatch of the entertainment area (above) where brunch and high tea are served

A boat ride on the Lephalala river (right). 

For map reference see inside back cover

Lapalala Wilderness Wildlife Sanctuary

☎ (011) 453 7645, or fax (011) 453 7649

Where:

Lapalala Wilderness Wildlife Sanctuary, the Waterberg Environmental Centre and Walker's Wayside Restaurant and Conference Centre in the Waterberg mountains are situated on the road to Marken, via Vaalwater.

Accommodation:

One luxury, fully-catered, tented camp with en suite shower and toilet and 10 self-catering hutted camps with inside showers and toilets and reed roller blinds.

Bedding, crockery, cutlery, paraffin lamps, gas rings and a fridge are provided, and there is a boma for fireside meals in all the camps.

Best time of year:

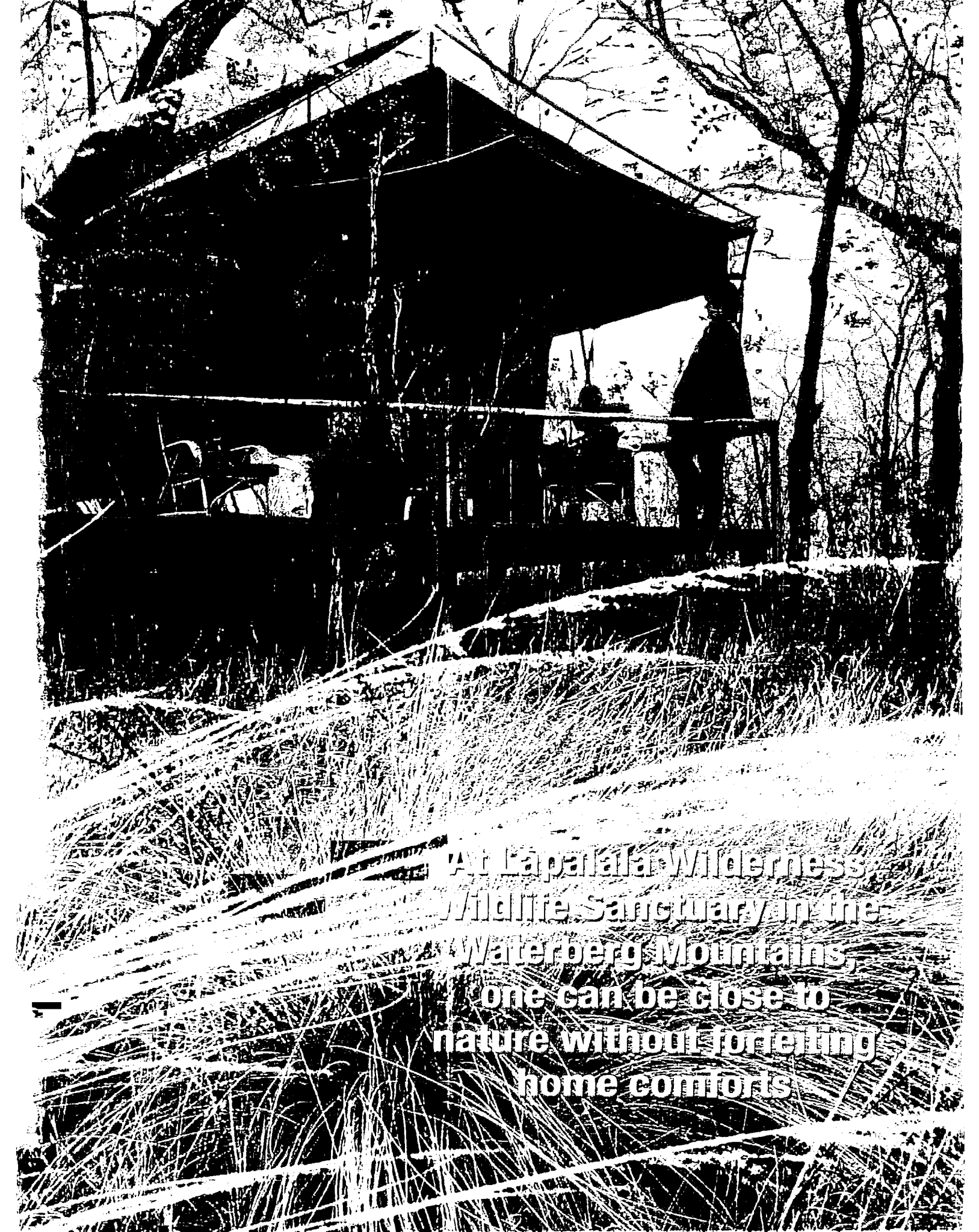
All year, but late spring and summer are best.

Remember:

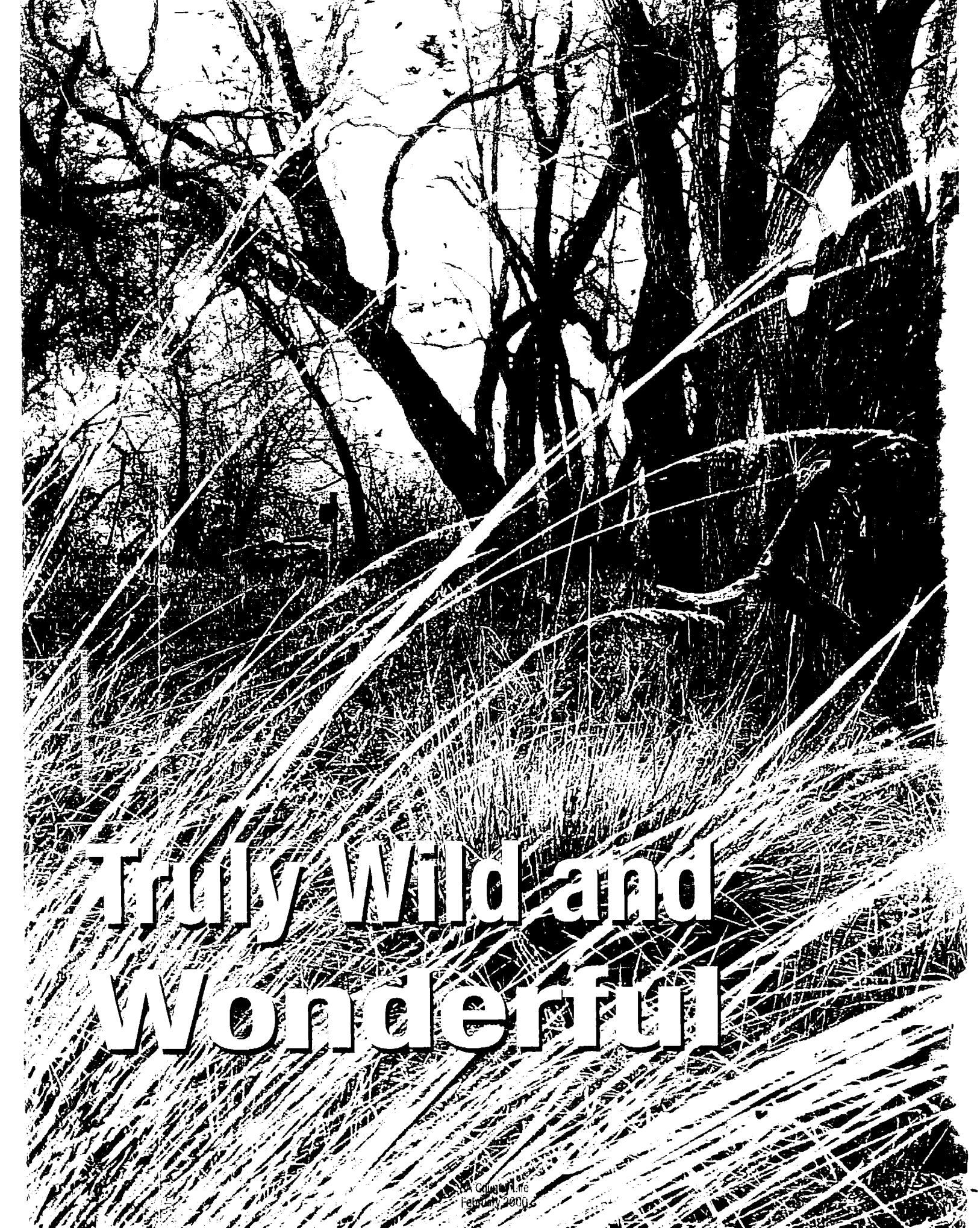
The reserve gates close at 17h30 from April to August and at 18h30 from September to March.

Brochures and maps:

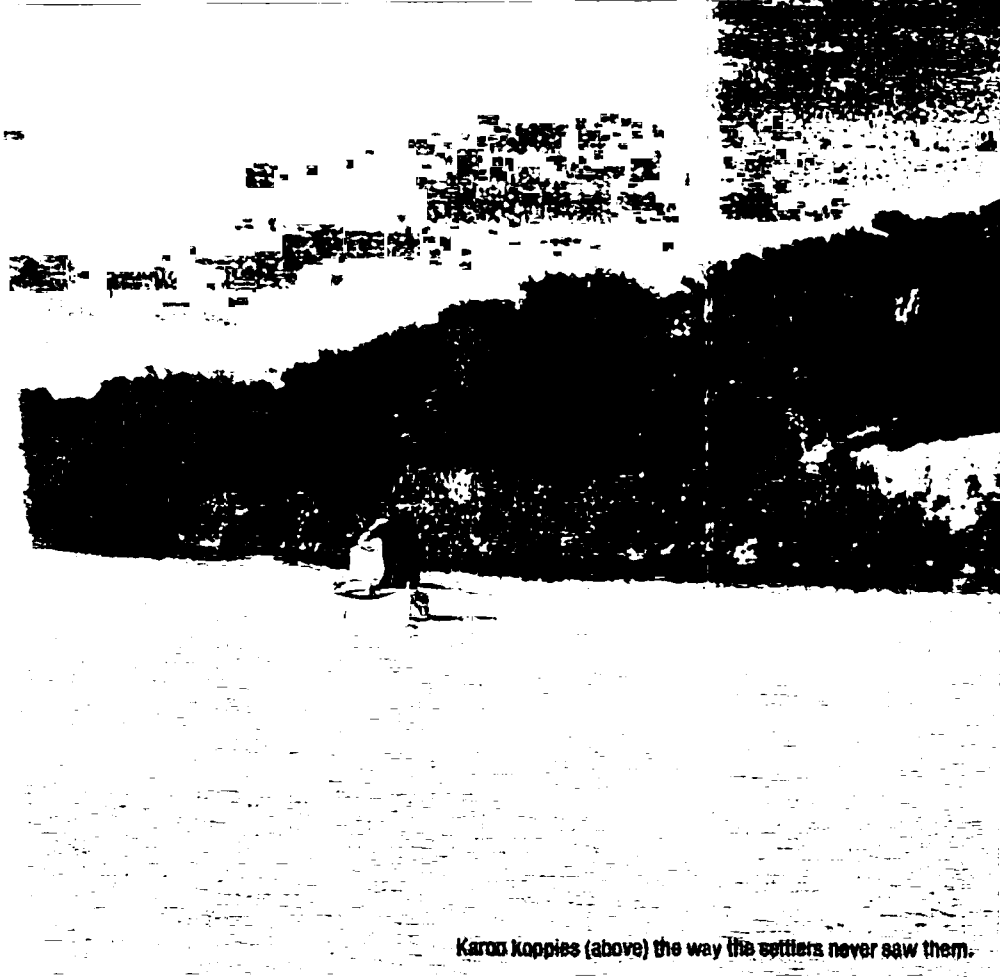
Available at the individual camps.



At Tlapalala Wilderness
Wildlife Sanctuary in the
Waterberg Mountains,
one can be close to
nature without forfeiting
home comforts.



Truly Wild and Wonderful



Karoo koppies (above) the way the settlers never saw them.

My wife collected me in a Land Rover at Kaffre Drift after that trip. The road, built by Thomas Baines in the mid-1800s, has run into some disuse, but it has a frontier feel about it. There is a police station at the site of the old fort at the top, but the ruined walls can be seen beneath the strangling roots of a wild fig tree. A nearby monument bears the names of settlers who perished in past skirmishes.

I returned down this track at a later stage to paddle from there to the river mouth alone on my surf-ski. Once I was on the water, the familiar sense of adventure returned. No knowing how this is going to turn out, I thought to myself. Will I have enough food and water? Exactly how far is it? Mullet jumped, an eagle soared and the cormorants waited undertaker-like on dead branches as I stroked on towards the mouth.

At some stage or other I bought a second-hand 'Tupperware' or white-water kayak, to use for guiding. This really opened up rivers in a greater way. Depending on the make, you may be able to pack some gear for an overnight trip in one of these. They are almost indestructible, generally track well in still water once you get the knack and, of course, are built to handle the rough stuff with ease. The type of water which leaves many boats in serious


trouble is really entry level for a Tupp. The Swallow was an early design, not very responsive, and it simply served to get me downriver and sometimes up a rapid.

Different canoes appeal to different types of folk. Lilly Dippers, as they are known, love to paddle on ponds in stable Canadian canoes. They watch the birds or cast a line out for bass. 'In-your-face-with-an-attitude' blokes are found in Tupperwares and their derivatives, paddling about in unimaginably high white water or ridiculously steep creeks which are really just channels for free-falling water. 'Tear-in-the-face, lopsided-grin'-type guys are often found sitting in long-distance racing kayaks with a thousand-yard stare in their eyes. Then there are the average folk, from all walks of life found in Mohawks and Crocs on rivers all over the country. But most of the time you will find that folk who muck about in boats are nice people, whichever category they fall into.

Which boat are you likely to find me in? Well, it all depends on the river, the occasion or the mood. If I want a fresh look at the koppies of the Eastern Cape, it may be a touring kayak. If I want some excitement, it'll be in a Tupperware following the Kraai River gorge in the north-eastern Cape. If I'm out to spend some time with my wife or treat some friends, it'll be a

Croc, weaving between the forts of an old frontier. If it's birdlife I'm after, I'll do another trip down the Little Fish River, keeping an eye out for Marsh Owls and South African Shelducks.

It was at some indefinable moment that I realised that no matter how long I was off a river or out of a canoe, a sense of oneness had been established. When I put in again and the current tugged at my little craft, I would sit forward with a sense of resolve and it would all come back. A river knows when you are not confident. It reads the feeling through your boat. When paddle, paddler, boat and water are in unison with each other in a fluid match of concentricity, mucking about in a canoe becomes second nature.

There is a part of me which now encompasses many things in one flow. Canoes, family, friendships, rivers, estuaries, fitness, driving, travel, wildlife, holidays, adventure, toil, history and life are equally diluted. I am richer for having mucked about in canoes and rivers. My eldest son is still a little young to hoist a paddle, but before too long the words of Michel Marriott will apply to our canoeing heritage: "Life's journey is circular, it appears. The years don't carry us away from our fathers – they return us to them." 

- River or canoe training are offered by all local canoeing clubs. River guide training or introductory courses to rivers are offered by the South African Rivers Association (SARA), (012) 667 1838.
- The canoeing gear mentioned is obtainable through local stores. The canoes mentioned are available as follows: Tugela – Roamer Rand (Gauteng); Crocodile – African River Craft (Cape Town); Mohawk – Roamer Cape (Cape Town).
- South African rivers are generally rocky and shallow. Rivers are graded from I to VI. Grades IV to VI are for experienced paddlers only, while most commercial trips include up to Grade III.
- The sport has inherent dangers. Wear a lifejacket and a helmet if the river is fast flowing and rocky. Book on a commercial trip for an introductory experience and then try a course. It's worth it. SARA has a list of operators in your area.