

# #WalkTheGRNP – initiating the Garden Route National Park Camino

Text by Bheki Maphanga & Stefanie Freitag-Ronaldson



FOUR DAYS OF WALKING FROM GEORGE TO KNYSNA ENABLED CONNECTING WITH COLLEAGUES, WITH NATURE, AND SLOWING DOWN TO RECONNECT WITH SELF. THE ALL-ROUND HEALTH BENEFITS OF THIS CAMINO-TYPE WALK CAN PROVIDE AN INSPIRED NEW WAY OF CONNECTING SOCIETY WITH NATIONAL PARKS AND NATURE.

After much COVID-19 related isolation, many people are walking, reconnecting with themselves, each other and nature. So too, a group of avid SANParks colleagues embarked on a 4-day camino (a way, path, journey or pilgrimage), trialling a wider opportunity to share the healing power of parks.

We started on the western-most flank of the park near George, ending 4 days and 70 kilometres later at SANParks' Knysna Thesen Island offices. The route included jeep tracks, unmarked slippery downhill, long isolated beach walks, estuary

crossings, old train bridges, coffee pit-stops and peaceful lake-side trails. It was exciting to be out of the office again, experiencing the park's fynbos, forest and coastal environment on foot. We reconnected and rejuvenated after pandemic-induced separation, sharing experiences of adapting to new norms. Overnighting at Ebb & Flow, Rondevlei and Buffalo Bay provided more time to chat and connect over dinner.

#WalkTheGRNP was full of fun, some tough walking and exciting memories. Highlights included scrambling up slippery rocks at Kaaimans River

mouth, helping each other pull and push, then along the railway line, through the tunnel to Wilderness and a well-earned cup of coffee! The long beach walk (~21 kms) between Sedgfield and Buffalo Bay required timing the tides and overcoming tired legs. This remote coastal stretch also tells the story of human unkindness to nature, from pollution from huge shipping objects on beautiful sands, to deposited plastic remnants of all sizes and colours. We were hunter-gatherers of a different kind here, collecting litter like empty bottles, plastics and ropes. The last day provided a unique perspective of the park as we crossed Knysna estuary via the old train bridge.

Four days of unhurried walking gave a refreshing perspective on the privilege of working in SANParks, of the joys of collaboration and teamwork and the need to get out into nature to refresh body and soul. Opportunities like this, where we experience our beautiful parks together with passionate colleagues, are important in motivating us along our journey in conservation and SANParks.

# Bird Island - A special place for research

Text by Cloverley Lawrence, Ian Russell & Jessica Hayes  
Photos by Jessica Hayes

BIRD ISLAND OFFERS A WINDOW INTO THE PAST, A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY FOR SCIENTIFIC STUDY, AND A REFUGE FOR BIODIVERSITY, REQUIRING MAXIMUM PROTECTION.

To venture onto Bird Island is to endure an assault on your senses. Located off the Algoa Bay coast, this 'mini Marion' is home to one of the last populations of African penguins, as well as the world's largest Cape gannet colony. A few hardy scientists set off from Gqeberha before dawn one early March morning and braved the three hour, cold, wet, bone-jarring boat ride (without back braces) to the island to undertake research. As we drew near, an impressively striking lighthouse in sight, our senses were overwhelmed by the pungent odour wafting from the communal residence of 200 000 gannets, the cacophony of their incessant cackling, and the visual spectacle of a sky buzzing with thousands of arriving and departing birds.



*Cloverley Lawrence, Ian Russell and Jessica Hayes on Bird Island in March 2022.*