

Wetlands

No false start for South Africa's newest Ramsar site



Sue Matthews

The False Bay Nature Reserve in Cape Town has been designated as South Africa's 22nd Ramsar site. Sue Matthews explored what makes this site so special.

At a celebratory function held on 2 February – World Wetlands Day – the Ramsar certificate declaring the False Bay Nature Reserve a 'wetland of international importance' was presented by Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs, Barbara Thomson. The reserve includes three large wetlands – Rondevlei, Zeekoevlei and the manmade Strandfontein pans – as well as numerous small seasonal or ephemeral wetlands that appear with good rains and a high water table. Together, these wetlands make up just over 50% of the reserve.

The Ramsar status has been a long time coming, having first been mooted some 15 years ago by residents of the short

peninsula jutting out into Zeekoevlei, the city's largest natural inland waterbody. This small enclave of dinghy sailors, rowers, and lovers of wide-open spaces is accessed along a narrow strip of land separating Zeekoevlei and Rondevlei, so the cause was soon taken up by the Friends of Zeekoevlei and Rondevlei, a local community group. However, the Ramsar submission needed to be made by the 'owner' of the site, the City of Cape Town, so it was only after the City council had approved the boundaries of the False Bay Nature Reserve a few years ago that the application process could begin.

The 2 300 ha reserve – still awaiting its official proclamation at the time of writing – is a consolidation of six

sections, two of which were already municipal nature reserves. The Rondevlei Nature Reserve was originally proclaimed in 1952 as a bird sanctuary, consisting only of the waterbody and its shoreline, but it has been expanded over the years to cover a 290 ha area that includes a small patch of Cape Flats Sand Fynbos, a critically endangered vegetation type. There are six bird hides and two observation towers along the northern shore, and a variety of birds are readily seen, but the same cannot be said for the resident population of six hippos. After an absence of almost 300 years, hippos were re-introduced to Rondevlei in 1979 to control an invasive alien grass species, but are rarely seen by visitors, given their nocturnal habits.

They have made the national news on a few occasions over the last decade, though, when individuals have escaped from the reserve and taken up temporary residence in either Zeekoevlei or the Strandfontein pans.

Jan van Riebeeck's naming of Zeekoevlei – Dutch for 'hippo lake' – in 1656 attests to its suitability as a home for hippo, before they were shot to extinction in the Cape. Since then, the waterbody has been degraded by hardening of the banks, construction of a weir to maintain a high water level for boating, and input of both stormwater runoff from urban and industrial development, and nutrient-rich groundwater seepage from the Philippi agricultural area and nearby sewage works. It has been plagued by pollution problems, sedimentation, toxic algal blooms, proliferation of reeds and water hyacinth, and the loss of natural weed beds, but the Zeekoevlei Nature Reserve was nevertheless proclaimed in June 2000. Beginning in 1997, sluice gates in the weir have been opened each autumn to allow an annual 'drawdown' of the waterbody to flush out nutrients and allow litter, water hyacinth and excess reed growth to be removed, while a cut-off drain constructed in 2008 has reduced nutrient seepage from the sewage works.

The Strandfontein pans had no formal protected area status until their inclusion in the False Bay Nature Reserve, largely because they were constructed as oxidation ponds for sewage treatment. Since the upgrade of the Cape Flats Waste Water Treatment Works in 1980 they have served as settling ponds for the final effluent, providing a rich feeding ground for a variety of birds.

The Cape Bird Club has been conducting regular counts here since 1983, and over the years has recorded almost 200 species, with bird numbers averaging 15 000 in the summer months. The data revealed that the site met the criteria for Important Bird Area status – hosting species of global and regional conservation concern, assemblages of birds with restricted range, and large concentrations of congregatory species – which resulted in the site being designated an IBA in 1998. From 2004 the Cape Bird Club used a bequest from Mrs Julie te Groen to co-fund the appointment of a conservation manager for the site, in a partnership arrangement with the City of Cape Town.

The other three sections that make up the False Bay Nature Reserve are areas to the west (Slangtjiebos) and east (Pelican Park) of the Strandfontein pans, and the coastal strip (Zandwolf). Slangtjiebos is a somewhat degraded piece of land squeezed between a major landfill site, the Capricorn Business and Industrial Park, and the Vrygrond township, a mix of informal settlement and low-cost housing, but it is important as a buffer zone protecting the Strandfontein birdlife. Pelican Park is an area of vegetated dunes, where Cape Flats Dune Strandveld – the dominant vegetation type throughout the False Bay Nature Reserve – is in particularly good condition. The final piece of the puzzle, Zandwolf, not only links the freshwater wetlands to the sea, but also provides an ecological corridor between Zandvlei Nature Reserve in the west and Wolfgat Nature Reserve in the east.

What is the Ramsar Convention?

The Ramsar Convention, formally known as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources.

The treaty was negotiated by countries and non-governmental organisations concerned about the increasing loss and degradation of wetland habitat for migratory waterbirds. It was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. There are currently 168 contracting parties.



The False Bay Nature Reserve includes Rondevlei, Zeekoevlei and the Strandfontein pans, as well as a number of small seasonal wetlands.



Manager of the False Bay Nature Reserve, Asieff Khan, with the Ramsar certificate awarded on World Wetlands Day.



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Top: Zeekoevlei is the main recreational node of the reserve, popular for watersports such as rowing and dinghy sailing, as well as fishing.

Left: Cape Bird Club stalwart Felicity Ellmore shows nature conservation student Adriel Cloete how to measure wing-length during a bird-ringing exercise at Rondevlei.

The different characteristics of the various sections are key to meeting the objectives of the False Bay Nature Reserve. While conserving and rehabilitating indigenous biodiversity is its primary purpose, secondary objectives are to promote environmental education, create recreational and tourism nodes, and provide job opportunities.

“We’ve got something for everybody here, and try to tick all the boxes,” says reserve manager Asieff Khan.

Two overnight facilities at Zeekoevlei accommodate 40 and 120 learners respectively for programmes run by the Cape Town Environmental Education Trust, which is partly funded by the City of Cape Town. The more rustic Otter Bush Camp at Rondevlei catered for 20 youth until it was destroyed by a veld fire in January.

Rondevlei also has an island bush camp operated by a private tour company, which offers boat cruises too between August and February, when the water level is high enough. Staying overnight or taking a sunset cruise offers the best chance of seeing the elusive hippos, otherwise evident only from footprints or dung left behind on their nightly wanderings. The camp is particularly popular with birders and carp-fishers, but also provides a wonderful outdoor adventure for families.

The Strandfontein pans are considered the best waterbird locality in Cape Town, and would be on the ‘to do’ list for any serious birder visiting the city. The good gravel roads between the pans allow visitors to use their cars as mobile hides, but

maximising the ecotourism potential must clearly be weighed against unnecessary disturbance to the birds.

Zeekoevlei is the main recreation node of the reserve, and has also had the most impact in terms of job opportunities. The vlei has long been popular for watersports, but the eastern shore – a previously neglected area that attracted a ‘bad element’ – has undergone a major upgrade over the past two years, and now has lush lawns, paved parking areas, smart new ablution facilities and formal braai areas to lure local residents.

The project was made possible by a R25-million contribution of Expanded Public Works Programme funding from the national Department of Tourism and R1-million from the provincial government, and provided temporary jobs for 160 previously unemployed and unskilled people drawn from the surrounding communities. The training they received and experience gained has improved their chances of finding other employment now that the project is complete.

“And then there’s Pelican Park, where there are fantastically beautiful dunes – 40 m high in places – with dune-slack wetlands at the base of them,” says Khan. “The vegetation there is quite unique, and is home to a butterfly species found nowhere else in the world, so we try to keep human impacts out of that area.”

“Obviously with people living right on the reserve’s boundary it does present challenges, and there will be impacts – we’ve had metal poles stolen for scrap and reports of quad bikers in

the dunes, for example – so we try and establish relationships with as many people as possible. But that takes time and effort, and you only see the results on a long-term basis.”

He adds that one advantage of having employed people from the local community for the eastern shore development is that they’ve become protective over the infrastructure they built, which should help limit the amount of vandalism.

Another 30 people were taken on for the reserve’s two-year Skills Development Programme, which provides on-the-job training in alien-clearing, chainsaw operation, plant cultivation, fire-fighting and first aid, amongst others. In this case, the EPWP funding was from the Department of Environmental Affairs’ Natural Resource Management Programme, under which the ‘Working for’ programmes now fall.

One of the alien-clearing projects tackled by these workers is the manual removal of water hyacinth, which seems to have achieved its eradication from Zeekoevlei and some of the Strandfontein pans. A few of the other pans are so completely covered by the weed that herbicides may need to be used – the biocontrol agents released to date have not been effective.

The clearing work at Strandfontein started in 2011 under the supervision of the conservation manager funded by the Cape Bird Club. Now that this post has been absorbed into the reserve’s management structure, the Cape Bird Club is supporting conservation at the site in other ways.

“We’re funding research by the conservation manager, Erica Essig, on how we can improve the habitat for birds using the shore line, and also employing a foreman to assist her,” says Dr Dave Whitelaw, who set up the club’s conservation committee in 1989 and has chaired it ever since. He himself has played an instrumental role in enhancing the birdlife at the site by encouraging the sewage works staff, some 15 years ago, to manipulate water levels in the pans.

“We started with a pan or two and the spectrum of birds changed quite impressively, and things developed from there!” Today there is a mix of water depths, exposed sandbanks and fringing reedbeds, catering for a variety of habitat preferences.

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For a time during the early 2000s, though, the future of the Strandfontein birdlife looked rather bleak. A private

consortium proposed building an extension of a major highway, the R300, to form a tolled ‘ring road’ linking the False Bay coast to Blaauwberg on the west coast. A section of the road was planned to pass through the narrow strip of land between Zeekoevlei and the Strandfontein pans, which would have resulted in considerable disturbance to birds, as well as injuries and deaths due to bird strikes. Fortunately, after five years of EIA preparation, public participation, petitions and protests, the proposal was quashed – or at least put on the backburner indefinitely.

“This is where the Ramsar designation is so important, because it would have to be taken into account if anybody wanted to build a toll road through there now,” says Dr Whitelaw. “It has certainly elevated the status of the False Bay Nature Reserve, and would give us a bit more clout to debate the issue.”

As reserve manager, Asieff Khan has noticed an additional benefit.

“More than anything it’s given the staff recognition for what they are doing, and they have a whole new healthy respect for themselves,” he says. “I can see they’re working harder than they ever had. It’s just done marvels for people’s morale!”



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The rich birdlife at the Strandfontein pans was a contributing factor for the designation of the reserve as a Ramsar wetland of international importance.