

# Always look up

by Iga Motylska

**The stillness is loud at Roam Private Game Reserve, where the Great Karoo unravels its wild heart. From sunrise game drives in search of cheetah to watching the golden-hour rituals of meerkats before the sun extinguishes, Roam's immersive eco-tourism experiences are defined by its intimate connection with nature.**

The Great Karoo is a mosaic of sedimentary rocks, where each layer tells a chapter in Earth's narrative. This palette of earthy hues is a portrait of resilience. A number of ecological adaptations bear testament to nature's unyielding tenacity in this arid environment – from how a tortoise stores much-needed water in its multifunctional cloacal bursae, to how *toktokkies* evolved a fused outer shell (elytra) to reabsorb condensation during breathing, in exchange for their ability to fly.

Initially a sheep farm and briefly a hunting farm, today Roam Private Game Reserve is a sanctuary for wildlife species that historically roamed these 5 000 ha plains between the Swartberg and the Nuweveld mountains. It forgoes obligatory Big Five safari checklists in favour of eco-tourism wildlife experiences that concentrate on the smaller things that are so often overlooked, yet play a crucial role in sustaining the ecosystem.

While other guests might have picked tracking collared cheetahs on foot, or photographing the meerkat family from close, my highlight was bird ringing. Even though I admit that I am no birder.



## Where to stay on the way: Canvas Collective Africa

If you are road tripping all the way to and from Cape Town, stop at Canvas Collective Africa for respite from the heat of the semi-arid desert. This luxury, tented camp within the Hemel-en-Aarde valley borders several award-winning wineries and is just over 30 minutes from the ocean. With guided walks, numerous running and biking trails, a dam for stand-up paddle boarding, and gourmet, three-course meals, there is no time to get bored. A stay here is all about relaxation, whether you are swaying on a macramé swing chair sipping a drink, unwinding in the hot tub, sitting around the fire or snuggling into your electric blanket.

[www.canvascollectiveafrica.com/hemel-en-aarde-valley](http://www.canvascollectiveafrica.com/hemel-en-aarde-valley)



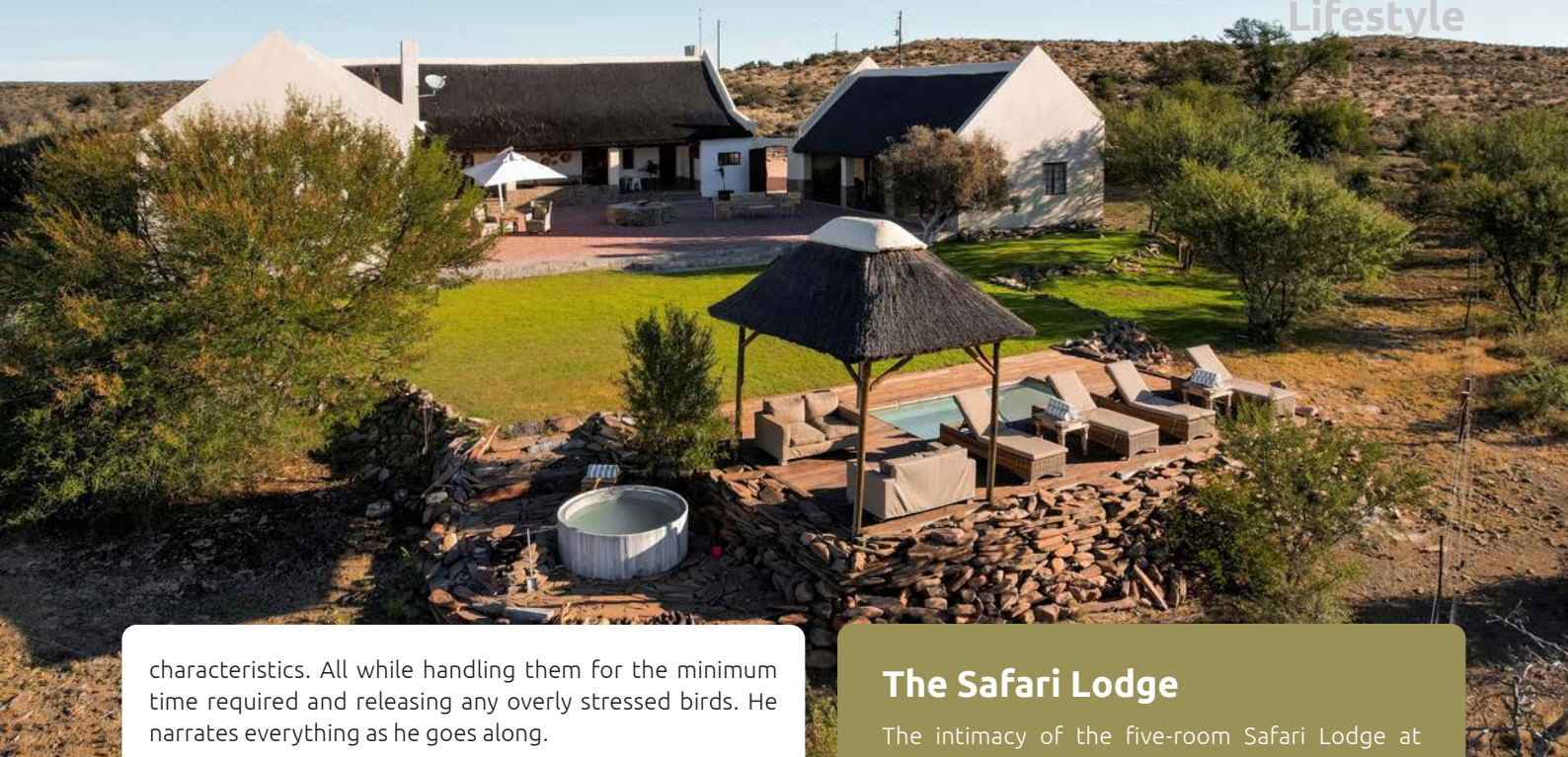
With no rush to race the sun before it scattered the wildlife beneath tree-top canopies, nor the need to return from a game drive for a mid-morning nap, Donovan de Swardt, the reserve manager, set up two mist nets at the foot of the lodge while we ate breakfast.

As Donovan gently untangled each bird from the nets to place them within small linen bags, he outlined the recent history of bird ringing. In the early 20th century, it was believed that swallows excavated tunnels beneath lakes and rivers for winter hibernation. It was only in 1905 when Danish ornithologist Hans Christian Cornelius Mortensen received a letter from a boy in KwaZulu-Natal, who had shot a white stork that Mortensen had ringed, that widespread bird ringing gained traction. It was the first scientific evidence of trans-equatorial migration of any animal species. Bird ringing only made its way to South Africa in 1948, where it is overseen by The South African Bird Ringing Unit at the University of Cape Town (SAFRING), which requires a strict qualification and apprenticeship.

"Around 10% of South Africa's 160-odd qualified bird ringers are scientists, while the remainder are volunteers like myself," he explains. "In my biased opinion, volunteers 'cast a wider net' and indiscriminately collect a diverse dataset; while scientists might collect better data, they often focus on a single species due to their funding."

I watch how Donovan deftly takes measurements of each bird's beak length, wing span, tail feathers, weight, and average age and sex based on its plumage and physical





characteristics. All while handling them for the minimum time required and releasing any overly stressed birds. He narrates everything as he goes along.

“Watch this,” he says, as a boyish smile spreads across his face. We peer over his shoulder. Donovan takes a bird, gently holds its legs, turns it onto its back in his cupped palm and blows to expose its belly. I forget which bird species it was, though a real twitcher could happily rattle off some of the 200-odd endemic and migratory species found in these parts from red-billed quelea and lark-like buntings to acacia pied barbets and fairy flycatchers.

As it is not nesting season, the bird does not have a brood patch. “Nesting birds develop brood patches when their down feathers fall out, exposing a network of capillaries on their belly. Most birds tuck their eggs or babies right up against their skin to transfer their body heat,” Donovan explains.

His measurements will be submitted to SAFRING’s global database, which is available to all ornithologists and bird ringing volunteers. It informs our understanding of bird populations and earmarks those that need protection. By comparing historic and current data, ornithologists study how nesting times and behaviours are changing due to climate change and other environmental factors.

Donovan clasps a small, aluminium ring with a unique number on the birds’ legs before allowing each of us to release one. Though we are only bystanders, keenly listening in and watching on with intrigue, bird ringing sparks an admiration for the natural world that feels akin to stepping into a David Attenborough documentary.

## The Safari Lodge

The intimacy of the five-room Safari Lodge at Roam Private Game Reserve ensures that guests receive personalised attention. It is difficult to pick what stands out most about the lodge – whether it is wallowing in the wood-fired hot tub, lounging on the swimming pool deck, losing track of time as you gaze over the endless vastness of the Karoo, or huddling around the bonfire. One thing is certain, the homely food will make you feel welcome and the game rangers will astound you with their elaborate knowledge of the landscape and its biome. All of which makes for a different kind of safari beyond the Big Five, with the time and space to roam the Karoo.

[www.roamthekaroo.co.za](http://www.roamthekaroo.co.za)

