



FAUNA AND FLORA

FLORAL SPLENDOUR OF THE FREE STATE

Sources: Dr Andor M Venter, Prof Johan Venter, Dr Johan du Preez.

Travellers through the Free State invariably believe that this region of South Africa offers little scenic beauty. It is often humorously joked that, when lying flat on the ground in the Free State one can see fourteen days into the future.

The sweet thorn tree, beautifully clad in yellow in late springtime, is an integral entity of the drainage lines in the grassland landscape.



Due to the aridity and occurrences of frost in winter, tree species are rare in the Highveld landscape and are restricted to river banks and to protected slopes and valleys of the many doleritic hills. Although the word grassland implies fields of grass species, this is not true. A large variety of herbaceous species, some with spectacular displays of flowers, occur in the grassland. The “ploegbreker” with its brilliant red flowers, chandelier lily with its umbels of deep pink trumpets, the Orange River lily with its large delicately pink petals are outstanding examples of this natural splendour. The slopes of the many flat-topped hills, dispersed through the central grassland, are clothed in wild olive, karee, broom karee and cabbage tree.

A familiar sight along river and stream banks is the willow tree, some of these exotic and some indigenous to the grassland landscape. The well-known weeping willow is an exotic, but blends with the Free State river landscape so naturally that one cannot envisage Free State stream vistas without willows.



What could be more tranquil than a weeping willow with branches shadowing clear ponds of water over which flit red and yellow bishop finches? Interestingly, our willows are kin to the willow from which the world’s wonder drug, aspirin, was isolated.

The extremely rare *Psilotum nudum*, an ancient, living fossil fern dating back some 400 million years, is found growing on seepages in a few sandstone caves such as on Korannaberg.



Many hiking trails with exotic names allow the traveller to explore the scenic and floristic extravagance of the mountains.

Travelling west brings one into the arid landscapes, such as the Kalahari sands in the northwest and the limestone reefs of the west and southwest.

These pedological formations create two very different floristic entities. On the sands an open savannah is dominated by the spectacular camel thorn tree. Where can the weary traveller find a more inviting shady coolness in the burning heat of a summer afternoon?

The calcareous reefs create very shallow and alkaline soils, thus a very harsh environment for the plants. The species present are well adapted to extreme arid conditions, for example smaller leaves to retard transpiration and extensive root systems. Umbrella thorn, black thorn, candle-pod thorn and camphor bush typically dominate the landscape.

The Karoo Region of the south-western Free State is not for the faint of heart but for the curious explorer able to see beyond the harshness to the wonder world of strange and unique plants. Unexpectedly, many of the normally inconspicuous plants reveal extraordinary shows of flowers after the occasional rain shower.

Karoo bushes such as the golden wild pomegranate, red flowered cancer bush, water storing succulents like the orange-red aloes, purple and yellow mesembs and white kambroo, purple flowered wolf thorn, fragrant thorny asparagus and yellow carpets of ostrich “dubbeltjies” greet the visitor.



To sit on a sandstone outcrop surrounded by infinite blue skies with green mountain forest at your feet and vast vistas unfolding in the distance, to experience the peace and quiet of a early Free State evening while the setting sun paints the fields of grasses a golden hue, to view a lone camel thorn tree silhouetted against the red sunset is to be refreshed and enriched in mind and spirit.





The Boyden Observatory, at Maselspoort Bloemfontein, was built in 1927 by Harvard University, America is home to a wonderous array of over 3 000 beautiful and delicate orchid plants. A specially designed section - the Fragrance Garden - has been set aside for visitors who are visually impaired.

Rustfontein Dam Nature Reserve is popular for water sports activities, bird watching and game drives.

Soetdoring Nature Reserve: The 7 500 ha Soetdoring Nature Reserve lies 45 km Part of the attraction of the reserve is its unique form of accommodation every year, during Spring, thousands of migrating European wallows flock here. This reserve lies just off the Thaba 'Nchu road, 50 km east of Bloemfontein. The tree-covered hillocks and ridges and grassy plains are home to animals such as wildebeest, blesbok, springbok and zebra. The dam inside the reserve is home to several species of waterfowl and Egyptian geese are usually present in large numbers. The natural vegetation is savannah veld dotted with hardy camel-thorn trees. The tops of the camel-thorn trees make ideal nesting places for white-backed vultures. Camping sites are available. The name "Soetdoring" means "sweet thorn" - an indigenous thorn tree. Animals such as white rhino, eland and springbuck roam the plains of the reserve and kudu, waterbuck, reedbuck and impala find sanctuary in the bushes along the banks of the Modder River. Reptiles and smaller mammals, in the reserve, include the leguaan, the Cape clawless otter, the African wild cat and the water mongoose. The reserve also has a special predator park that contains lions and Cape wild dogs. The Modder River enters the reserve on its eastern border, snakes through the reserve and then exits into the Krugersdrift Dam in the west where a large variety of aquatic birds have made their home.

Old railway coaches parked under shady sweet thorn trees. swallows descend on a specific garden in the Bloemfontein suburb of Universitas. This garden has become their annual Spring habitat and they return here every year without fail.

RESERVES AND DAMS IN MOTHEO AND SURROUNDING AREAS

RESERVES

Franklin Game Reserve (Bloemfontein)
Maria Moroka Game Reserve (Thaba-Nchu)
Caledon Nature Reserve (Wepener)
Erfenis Dam Nature Reserve (Theunissen)
Gariiep Dam Nature Reserve (Gariiep)
Soetdoring Nature Reserve (Bloemfontein)
Tussen-Die-Riviere (Bethulie)

DAMS

Welbedacht
Rustfontein
Knellpoort
Mocke's Dam
Tierpoort
New Berry Dam
Maselspoort
Leeu River Dam
Egmont Dam



SOURCES



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