

# THABA THABO NATURE RESERVE

Hiking Trails:

●●●● Orange (5km)

----- Yellow (8km)

..... White (15km)

----- Blue (12km)

□ Sandstone

▨ Basalt

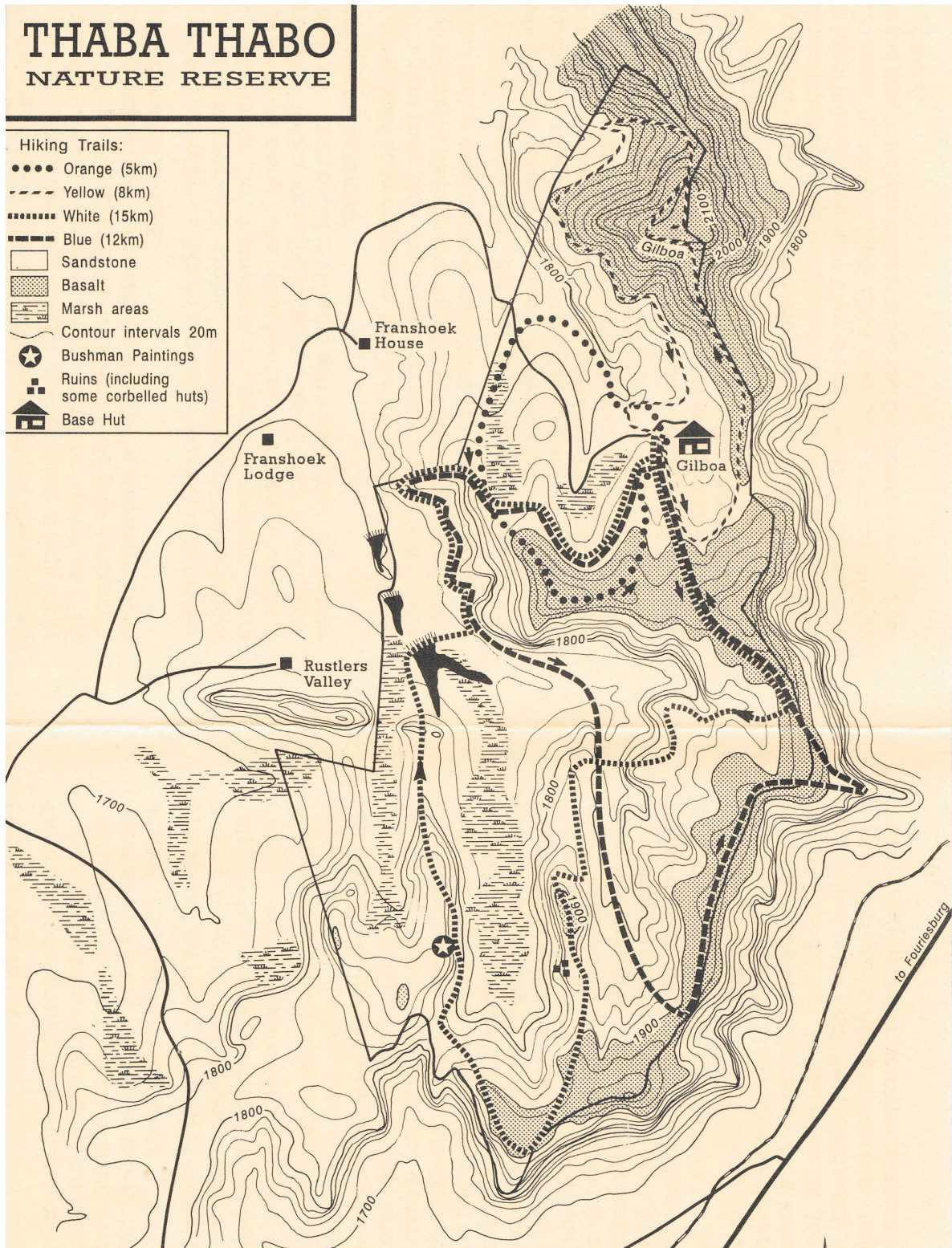
▨ Marsh areas

Contour intervals 20m

★ Bushman Paintings

▣ Ruins (including some corbelled huts)

▣ Base Hut



# HIKING TRAILS

All the hiking trails are guided and at a cost of R200 per person per day (excluding accommodation fees if required). A minimum of two hikers are required. Day visitors who do not want to follow a specific trail are also welcome and can walk anywhere on their own or have a picnic or braai. The cost for day visitors is also R200 per person.

## ORANGE TRAIL 5 KM

This is an easy walk taking about 2 hours. It is ideal if you would like a short walk before sunset or if you have to depart during the morning. It is very good for game viewing.

From the base camp at 1850m, the trail descends gradually along a gradual path between a water course and krantz to 1750m. It turns and follows a perennial stream eventually reaching the sandstone and onto a small peak on the basalt at 1965m. From here it descends along the sandstone to the base camp. The Orange Trail crosses the White Trail and it is possible to take a short-cut home.

Soon after the start, you pass Sunset Koppie (Sundowner Hill). Note that there are two dykes, Waterfall Dyke and Long-ridge Dyke, which intersect here. The intersection of dykes often results in deep incisions in the rock on the downstream sides. Here it has resulted in Gilboa Waterfall and a heavily wooded gorge on your right. Dassie should be visible on the krantz. From here the trail follows an old road; note the deep grooves cut in the sandstone by wagon wheels.

When you cross the stream and as you walk below the krantz, look out for steenbuck and duiker. Caracal and serval have been seen here but they are very elusive. When approaching the small dam on the left, look out for animals drinking and for feral indigenous Xhosa Lob Ear goats on the krantzes to your right.

After crossing the road, the trail follows a water course. There are southern reedbuck which live in this water course and these are sometimes seen in the area below William's Waterfall. Further up the water course is a broken dam and a pool of water. This pool always has clean water even in the worst of droughts and is visited regularly by otters. As you go up the sandstone, there is a clear path worn by buck which come from higher up to drink at Otter Pool.

From the top of 1965 Peak, you should have a panoramic view of the whole of Thaba Thabo. Thaba Thabo is 9 km long from the northern-most to the southern-most points. Look out for baboons along the krantzes to the south.

On the way down from 1965 Peak, back to the base camp, you will almost certainly see, especially in the evening, herds of blesbuck, black wildebeest and eland. The zebra are always present and you may see the hartebeest, however, they roam all over Thaba Thabo and may be seen only at a great distance.

## BLUE TRAIL 12KM

This trail is of average difficulty. It passes through many types of vegetation and will be enjoyed particularly by persons with an interest in plant life. Walking should take 5 to 6 hours, but if you are going to look at the vegetation, allow more time.

From the base camp, the Blue Trail follows a contour along the sandstone at 1860m. It descends along Long-ridge Dyke to 1760m and follows a contour below high sandstone krantzies. Here it passes three dams. The trail turns and continues eastwards below high krantzies, then it turns south to cross through a deep water course. From here the trail goes south almost the full length of the original Rustlers Valley. It climbs out of the valley onto the top of a flat mountainous area at an altitude of 1930m. The trail turns north and follows the water-shed. It deviates onto a high rocky promontory which overlooks a rock formation known as "The Sheep". The trail returns to the water-shed and joins a mountain road back to the base camp, passing through the area with the high concentration of animals.

In walking along the sandstone soon after the start, note the two horseshoe shaped valleys below. These valleys are the sources of perennial streams which provide clear water for the animals. Otters visit the pools along these water courses. There are a number of species of fynbos including large patches of *Erica cerinthoides*. This *Erica* makes bright red flowers with a peak flowering season from July to September.

In going down Long-ridge Dyke, look out for the interesting plants which grow here. One very interesting plant is *Hyobanche rubra* (rooi kappie), a parasite growing on the roots of other shrubs and all that is ever seen above ground is the red flower in spring.

In turning from the dyke, the trail goes through fynbos and on through trees below the krantzies. Many tree species grow in the protection provided by the krantzies. This is a good area for learning to identify trees. *Leucosidea sericea* (ouhout) is a pioneer tree: note how other tree species establish themselves under the protection of the *Leucosidea*. Look out for duiker here.

In leaving the krantzies, the trail goes across a water course deeply eroded to the bed rock. At the bottom of the water course, to the west, is an unusual exposure of a narrow dyke. Look for southern reedbuck and ground woodpeckers near here.

In going along the old Rustlers Valley, there are a number of different plant communities and some spectacular flowers such as *Brunsvigia*. On top of the mountain again there are different plant communities dominated by fynbos. Here *Erica maesta* is common. *Maesta* means sad, and *Erica maesta* is the sad *Erica* because its flower is so small.

The small pools in the sandstone, on top of the mountain provide intriguing habitats for unusual life forms. These pools are dry for much of the year and have water in them for only a few days or weeks at a time. Small flowering plants such as *Limosella inflata* spring to life and animals such as tiny shrimp must go through a complete life cycle in the short time that there is water in the pool. The shrimp are light blue and 15mm long.

The commonest grass species on top of the mountain is *Themeda triandra* (rooigras). Because it is well drained, the soil is relatively dry, particularly on the north and west slopes, and the grass is sweet and favoured by buck. Look for grey rhebuck and red hartebeest here. While walking along the top of the mountain keep a special watch for lammergeyer; they are sometimes seen flying along the krantzies.



After visiting The Sheep and as the trail approaches 1998 Peak, there is a very large area with *Watsonia densiflora* which is most spectacular in early summer. On the downslope towards the base camp there is a lone pine tree to the left. On the edge of the small krantz near this tree, there are clumps of the beautiful *Scilla natalensis* which is now rare in the wild. The *Scilla* flower in early November.

## YELLOW TRAIL 8 KM

This trail was designed to take 4 to 5 hours and is rated average to moderately difficult in places. The first half involves climbing up the mountain and down again while the second half is easy. This trail is best if you have to return home early in the afternoon, such as on a Sunday.

Starting at 1850m from the base camp, the trail rises gradually onto the sandstone and passes below the concentration of animals on the slopes above the base camp. The trail turns onto the basalt where it follows a path made by mountain reedbuck. It rises steadily up the water-shed to 2100m from where it follows a contour along the southern face of Mount Gilboa.

The contour path continues around to the north side of the peak and onto a secondary peak. There is a branch route on to the top of Mount Gilboa at 2183m. From here it is possible to see more than 100 km on a clear day. There is a 5m climb down a rocky face on the north side of Mount Gilboa. The climb is quite manageable but not suitable for persons experiencing vertigo. The branch trail meets the main trail on the north side. From the secondary peak, the trail descends fairly steeply along the mountain side to 1870m. The trail returns more or less at this altitude along animal paths above the sandstone kranzes. Near the base camp there is a short deviation past Sunset Rock and Gilboa Waterfall.

Within a 100m from the start, the trail goes up along Waterfall Dyke. A rich variety of plant life grows along dykes. *Watsonia* and *Erica* are conspicuous here. If you look back, you will see the concentration of small woody plants growing on this dyke where it bisects Sunset Rock and intersects the kranz face. On top of the sandstone rib, look for the sable antelope in the enclosure on the left and the buck on the slopes to the right.

Once you reach the basalt, paths made by mountain reedbuck will be clearly visible. The trail follows these paths most of the way. Note how the buck choose routes along the watershed and along contours to avoid causing erosion. Many animals leave their droppings in the paths. The peanut shaped droppings are those of mountain reedbuck, the single long thin dropping of mongoose, the long fat dropping of caracal or serval and the droppings consisting of segments plaited together are of porcupine.

Many mountain reedbuck live in small groups on the slopes of Mount Gilboa. They lie up during the day. If you are observant and go quietly, you are bound to see some, especially in the early morning. While walking on this trail keep a constant look out for black eagle which regularly fly around Gilboa Peak. Gymnogene are also seen on occasions but flying at a lower altitude than the black eagle. Rock kestrel are seen frequently along the highest ridges. The orange breasted rockjumper is a rare bird living above 2000m altitude. They are unafraid of humans and may be seen close by; look out for them on the north side of Mount Gilboa.

Once on the basalt, look out for the underground trees, *Rhus discolor* and *Rhus magalimontanum*. Only the tips of the branches, between a half and a metre high, are visible. The succulent plants forming dome shapes are *Euphorbia clavaroides* (vingerpol). Please do not touch them: if you cause them to bleed, they become infected and die.

The south face of Mount Gilboa is always moist and cold and a great variety of wild flowers grow here. Conspicuous in summer are *Agapanthus*, *Kniphoffia*, (red hot pokers), *Diascia* (pink) and white thistles. The west and north faces of Mount Gilboa are warm and dry and different flowers grow here such as *Aloe*, *Boophane* (the very large bulb half above ground), *Gladiolus*, *Eucomis*, *Eulophia* and many other flowers which make bulbs. Unfortunately the porcupine eat many of these.

After turning on the north side of Mount Gilboa and going down the descent, the trail comes close to a dyke in the basalt. Being on the south facing slope, again a rich variety of plant life is found. Note the *Cussonia* (kiepersol) which grow here; rarely do they grow big because they are eaten by eland in early spring and they are susceptible to frost.

At the bottom of the basalt slope, the trail turns back along a contour path made by buck. The trail continues at this level almost to the base camp following close to the contact between the basalt and the sandstone. Note the difference in the plants growing above, on and below the contact. Often the gemsbuck are seen in the valley below.

## WHITE TRAIL 15KM

This trail was designed for those hikers wanting more exercise and at the same time having an interest in nature. It has been rated as strenuous and needs some stamina and fitness. Walking will take about 8 hours and if you stop to look at the views and points of interest, more time must be allowed.

The White Trail climbs gradually to 1960m from the base camp, passing through the high slopes on which the animals are concentrated. It follows the mountain road along a contour before descending into a small valley and coming to Eden Waterfall at 1840m. The trail continues at this level, over quite rugged sandstone, until Big Wall Dyke is reached. It then goes straight down the krantz, along the dyke to the bottom of old Rustlers Valley at 1740m, and back up the dyke to a high sandstone ridge at 1840m. The trail follows the ridge, rising to 1910m on a small knob of basalt. Here there are pre-historic ruins and corbelled huts. The trail continues along the ridge onto the mountain top and onwards to a very high promontory at the southern most point of Thaba Thabo reserve.

The trail turns back along the top of very high krantzes before descending into Afton's large valley at 1760m. There are very interesting Bushmen paintings here. The trail continues along the side of the valley, over the ridge overlooking Afton's small valley, past an asparagus field, over a dam wall and joins the Blue Trail but going in the opposite direction. From here, the trail goes along the bottom of high krantzes, up Long-ridge Dyke, back onto the sandstone and along a contour at 1860m to the base camp.

From the base camp, as you walk up the north-west slope you should see zebra, eland, black wildebeest, blesbuck and springbuck. If you do not see the red hartebeest here, keep a watch out for them further along the trail. As you cross the ridge and walk onto the contour road below 1998 Peak, watch out for mountain reedbuck on the southern slopes. Along the rest of the trail keep watch for grey rhebuck high up and for southern reedbuck in the valleys.

After passing 1998 Peak, the White Trail turns away from the mountain road down an open slope. This slope is covered with *Watsonia densiflora* and is most spectacular in early summer. At the bottom of the slope there is a water course which leads to Eden Waterfall. This waterfall has been caused by the Waterfall Dyke which runs slightly west of north all the way back near the base camp through Sunset Rock and along the krantzes below Mount Gilboa. There are *Protea*, fynbos and many interesting plants all along and above the sandstone. Malachite sunbirds are frequently seen here as they come to feed on the nectar from the *Protea*.

From the promontory overlooking the original Rustlers Valley, you should be able to see many dassies, baboons and possibly southern reedbuck in the valley below. The accumulations of light coloured marble sized droppings are those of Smith's Red Rock Rabbit.

In going down the steep path on Big Wall Dyke, note how the dyke provides protection to the trees. An unusually large old *Cussonia paniculata* (kiepersol) grows here. Note the holes in the rock on the left and the large "Slit in the Wall" called Snake's Eye. Many birds use these holes as nesting sites. Dykes form passage ways for animals to move up and down krantzes. The Afrikaans name "Gang" for dyke is particularly appropriate in this regard.

The water course provides a good spot to rest before the climb up the Big Wall Dyke on the far side of the valley. Note that the dyke going up the west side of the valley has vegetation different from that on the dyke on the east side.

The ruins on top of the high ridge are believed to have been built by early Sotho peoples some 300 years ago. Most of the huts were thatched, but a few were corbelled (built up with stone to form the roof). Please do not touch the stones or stand on the walls. If only one visitor in a hundred moves a stone, there will be nothing left 300 years from now.

After descending from the top of the ridge with the ruins, the trail passes a rocky area where there could be snakes, so please be careful and watch out particularly for snakes sleeping in the path. The grey rhebuck are most frequently seen near the grass covered ridge on the south end of Thaba Thabo. There are also some feral goats here which shelter on a precipitous ledge high in the southern krantz.

The overhang with the Bushman paintings is cool and shady and a good place to have lunch. Please be particularly careful when viewing the paintings not to touch them with your finger or a stick. The sandstone weathers rapidly and flakes away. The pigments used in the paintings are charcoal, coloured soils and clay. It is particularly important not to wet them as this accelerates the weathering of the sandstone and washes the pigments away. From the paintings it can be seen that the red and ochre pigments are more persistent than the black and white pigments, and the most distinct paintings are therefore those in pure red or ochre. These particular paintings have not yet been properly recorded and it is all the more important not to damage them in any way.

On crossing Big Wall Dyke, note that the dyke has given rise to the ridge being crossed and the large ridge to the left. When this wide dyke was formed, it hardened the adjoining sandstone resulting in the adjoining sandstone weathering at a slower rate than the sandstone further away. There is a large "Hole in the Wall" in the ridge to the left called God's Eye.

You might find a swim in the dam refreshing before the climb back onto the high ridge leading to the base camp.