

## = Golden Gate Highlands National Park =

Golden Gate Highlands National Park is located in Free State , South Africa , near the Lesotho border . It covers an area of 340 km<sup>2</sup> ( 130 sq mi ) . The park 's most notable features are its golden , ochre , and orange @-@ hued deeply eroded sandstone cliffs and outcrops , especially the Brandwag rock . Another feature of the area is the numerous caves and shelters displaying San rock paintings . Wildlife featured at the park includes mongooses , eland , zebras , and over 100 bird species . It is the Free State 's only national park , and is more famous for the beauty of its landscape than for its wildlife . Numerous paleontology finds have been made in the park including dinosaur eggs and skeletons .

## = = Geography and climate = =

" Golden Gate " refers to the sandstone cliffs that are found on either side of the valley at the Golden Gate dam . In 1875 , a farmer called J.N.R. van Reenen and his wife stopped here as they travelled to their new farm in Vuurland . He named the location " Golden Gate " when he saw the last rays of the setting sun fall on the cliffs .

In 1963 , 47 @. @ 92 square kilometres ( 11 @, @ 840 acres ) were proclaimed as a national park , specifically to preserve the scenic beauty of the area . In 1981 the park was enlarged to 62 @. @ 41 km<sup>2</sup> ( 15 @, @ 420 acres ) and in 1988 it was enlarged to 116 @. @ 33 km<sup>2</sup> ( 28 @, @ 750 acres ) . In 2004 it was announced that the park would be joined with the neighbouring QwaQwa National Park . The amalgamation of QwaQwa National Park was completed in 2007 , increasing the park 's area to 340 km<sup>2</sup> ( 84 @, @ 000 acres ) .

The park is 320 km ( 200 mi ) from Johannesburg and is close to the villages of Clarens and Kestell , in the upper regions of the Little Caledon River . The park is situated in the Rooiberge of the eastern Free State , in the foothills of the Maluti Mountains . The Caledon River forms the southern boundary of the park as well as the border between the Free State and Lesotho . The highest peak in the park ( and also in the Free State ) is Ribbokkop at 2 @, @ 829 m ( 9 @, @ 281 ft ) .

The park is located in the eastern highveld region of South Africa , and experiences a dry sunny climate from June to August . It has showers , hails and thunderstorms between October and April . It has thick snowfalls in the winter . The park has a relatively high rainfall of 800 mm ( 31 in ) per year .

## = = Vegetation = =

The park is an area of rich highveld and montane grassland flora . It has more than sixty grass species and a large variety of bulbs and herbs . Each of these species has its own flowering time , meaning that veld flowers can be seen throughout the summer . The park also has Afromontane forests and high @-@ altitude Austro @-@ Afro alpine grassland , which is scarce in South Africa . The ouhout ( *Leucosidea sericea* ) , an evergreen species , is the most common tree in the park . Ouhout is a favourite habitat of beetles and 117 species occur on these trees in the park . The Lombardi poplars and weeping willows in the park are introduced species , but are kept because of their cultural and historic connection with the eastern Free State . Other exotic species in the park , for example wattle and bluegum , are systematically eradicated .

## = = Wildlife = =

Instead of reintroducing one of the " big five " into the park , the sungazer lizard and water mongoose were reintroduced . Twelve species of mice , ten species of carnivores and ten antelope species have been recorded in the park . The grey rhebuck and the mountain reedbuck were present when the park was established .

## = = = Mammals = = =

### == Birds ==

Over 210 bird species have been observed in the park , including the rare bearded vulture and the endangered Cape vulture and bald ibis .

### == Snakes and fishes ==

Seven snake species , including the puff adder , mountain adder , and rinkhals are found in the park .

### == Geology and palaeontology ==

The geology of the park provides very visual " textbook " examples of Southern Africa 's geological history . The sandstone formations in the park form the upper part of the Karoo Supergroup . These formations were deposited during a period of aeolian deposition towards the end of the Triassic Period . At the time of deposition the climate of the area the park covers was becoming progressively drier until arid desert conditions set in , resulting in a land of dunes and sandy desert , with occasional scattered oases . The deposition of the sandstones ended when lava flowed out over the desert 190 million years ago .

The following sequence of geological formations are visible in the park ( starting from the bottom ) : the Molteno Formation , Elliott Formation , Clarens Formation , and the Drakensberg Formation . The yellow @-@ brown Golden Gate and Brandwag cliffs are made up of the Clarens formation . The layers in this formation are 140 to 160 metres ( 460 to 520 ft ) thick . The Drakensberg formation comprises the basaltic lava that flowed over the desert . It forms the mountain summits in the park . On Ribbokkop it is 600 meters ( 2 @,@ 000 feet ) thick . The Elliot Formation is a red mudstone where many dinosaur fossils have been found .

The oldest dinosaur embryos ever discovered were found in the park in 1978 . The eggs were from the Triassic Period ( 220 to 195 million years ago ) and had fossilised foetal skeletons of Massospondylus , a prosauropod dinosaur . More examples of these eggs have since been found in the park . Other fossils found in the park include those of advanced cynodontia ( canine toothed animals ) , small thecodontia ( animals with teeth set firmly in the jaw ) , bird @-@ like and crocodile @-@ like dinosaurs .

### == Accommodation ==

Accommodation in the park is available at Glen Reenen and Brandwag Rest camps . Caravaning and camping sites with all amenities are available at Glen Reenen camp . The hotel was formerly part of Brandwag camp , but since its recent refurbishment it is managed separately by SANParks as Golden Gate Hotel . The nearest town to Golden Gate Highlands National Park is Clarens ( 17 km to the west ) , but Phuthaditjhaba is also easily reached via a good tar road , driving through the access gate to the east of the park .