

Bringing Cape mountain zebras back to Zebraskop

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A newly acquired piece of land is playing a key role in ensuring the genetic health of Cape mountain zebras.

Zebraskop, managed as part of Gamkaberg Nature Reserve in the Western Cape, carries a name that harks back to a mammal that once roamed freely in the Klein Karoo.

Similar to rhinos, Cape mountain zebras were once almost hunted to extinction – their numbers dropped as low as 60 individual animals at the start of the 20th century. Yet, while these striped horses may not garner as much attention as our rhinos, they are every bit as special.

Endemic to South Africa, their last strongholds were in only three places – an area near Cradock in the Eastern Cape (now the Mountain Zebra National Park) along with Kammanassie near Oudtshoorn and Gamkaberg near Calitzdorp, two provincial nature reserves in the Western Cape.

Through concerted conservation efforts, Cape mountain zebra numbers have recovered to an estimated 5 185 animals, but the threats remain. Among these are genetic weakness due to their being historically isolated in small populations, habitat fragmentation and hybridisation with other equids, including plains and Hartmann's mountain zebra.

This is why WWF and CapeNature have been working together to secure more land for Cape mountain zebras, in particular to better manage their metapopulation (a population distributed across many sites) and gene pool.

Thanks to a generous donation, WWF was able to buy the 4 172-hectare Zebraskop property, a former game farm which lies to the south of the Gamkaberg Nature Reserve, as a site for a genetic rescue programme.

As part of the first phase of this operation, excess existing game on the farm, among them springbok, plains zebra, ostriches and gemsbok, were sold off to raise funds and to allow the veld to recover from past overgrazing.

This money was then used to unlock phase two to establish a small breeding herd (or harem) of Cape mountain zebras from different genetic lineages. The plan was to put one stallion and four mares into a 400-hectare release camp where they could acclimatise to their new surroundings.

On 16 July 2024, the first of these – a mare from Kammanassie Nature Reserve – was moved to Zebraskop.

For reasons known only to her and perhaps following an ancient migration pattern, this mare had strayed off Kammanassie and was living on a farm called Annex Kykoe near Noll with a herd of cattle. Efforts to return her to Kammanassie had only resulted in her making the 25km trek (as the crow flies) back to rejoin her herd of cattle, and so it was decided that she would be a good candidate for the move to Zebraskop.

To help her settle, the team came up with a plan.

Theresa van der Westhuizen, Conservation Manager Off Reserve with CapeNature, explains: "We realised we would have to create an environment that she would be comfortable with so that she wouldn't want to go roaming again. The best case scenario was to put her with cattle because it seemed that is what she favoured, and so we arranged with a neighbouring farmer to loan three of his cattle to join her in the camp."

In September 2024, two more zebras were brought in – one a stallion that was airlifted from a farm adjacent to Gamkaberg (it too had left the reserve) and yet another Kammanassie mare.

The second mare had also strayed off the reserve and was living on a farm called Hooggenoeg near Vlakteplaas in the De Rust area. According to the landowner, she had been seen in the company of his cattle, springbok and even a few giraffes over a period of eight years.

Unfortunately, two more Kammanassie mares earmarked for the move could not be located on the day of the capture. Cape mountain zebras are remarkably hard to spot in their mountainous territory but as soon as they are located, efforts to capture them will get underway to round out the breeding herd.

For now, however, Theresa says the herd of three is settling well, although the Vlakteplaas mare is being somewhat bossy towards the Noll mare and trying to keep her away from the stallion.

All these efforts also came with many delays as the helicopter needed for the operation kept getting redeployed – first to assist in a salvage operation with a ship on the West Coast and another time to fight a fire in the Swartberg.

There's also a third phase of the project planned for which more funds are needed – to create a 2km by 500m-wide corridor to connect Zebraskop with Gamkaberg which will allow the zebras to roam more freely. This, however, will require good fencing and cattle grids as the zebras will have to cross public roads.

As to the pitter patter of tiny hooves? From previous experience, it would seem that zebras are very sensitive to translocations. It may be six months before the mares go into oestrus and yet a further 365-day gestation period before the first foal might be born.

We will keep you posted!



Dr Willem Burger, left, and Liwa Gunguluza, On Reserve Manager Gamkaberg Nature Reserve, microchip the stallion Cape mountain zebra during its release into the holding camp at Zebraskop.