



INTRODUCTION

KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, South Africa. The end of the Karkloof mountain range culminates in the Blinkwater (*shining water*); a land of indigenous forests, upland grasslands, vleis, streams and commercial plantations – home to the endangered Oribi and rare Blue Swallow. An ideal playground for nature lovers, birders, walkers, mountain bikers and adventurers or those just looking for a sanctuary of quietness away from the rush of everyday life.

Blinkwater Trails offer both overnight hikes and day walk options. The plan in the long term is to also introduce mountain biking options.

THE HIKING TRAILS

In 1994 history was made in the hiking world, when two timber companies and Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife joined forces to create a network of hiking trails in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. The original role players were HL&H Timber Products (now Mondi Forests), Sappi Forests and Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) and the Umvoti Branch of the Wildlife & Environmental Society.

Over the years, the trail network has evolved with over fifty kilometres of trails to be explored. Whilst the trails originally offered four overnight camps, at present only two are open namely Douglas Smith Cottage (on the southern side) and Mountain Falls camp (on the northern side). It is hoped that in time, the beautiful iPhasiwe Camp, situated in prime grasslands on the top of Blinkwater, can be re-established. As well as the outlying camp on the western side, known as Success.

ATTRACTIONS

The diverse terrain of the Blinkwater region offers a range of vegetation types and with it a variety of bird species, flora and fauna. The indigenous forests are classed 'Mist belt Podocarpus' - all three types of Yellowwoods are to be found together with a wide variety of very old trees, ie. huge Knobwoods, Lemonwoods and Figs. Bushbuck may be sighted.

The grasslands of the Blinkwater provide the perfect habitat for the dainty Oribi, common reedbuck and mountain reedbuck. The very rare Blue Swallow has been known to breed in the area. There is an abundance of bird life in the grassland and forests, approximately 135 species. Including the shy Crested Guinea fowl and the vociferous and brilliantly coloured Louries.

Hikers may also see the endangered Wattled Crane which breeds in the vicinity of Island Dam. During the spring and summer months' flowers are a delight to the eye, from proteas to rare orchids and in the winter months the beautiful flowers of *Psoralea pinnata* can be seen. Blinkwater was once the hunting ground of the Bushman and there is still evidence of their "hunting pits" on the edge of the forest. Local history abounds and the hiking trails

have been designed to incorporate as much of the past as possible. One section of the trail follows the course of the old railway line constructed at the turn of the nineteenth century to extract timber from the vast indigenous forests on the south slopes of the Blinkwater.

ACCOMMODATION

The trail offers two overnight camps, namely Douglas Smith Cottage and Mountain Falls Cottage. Both sleep up to twelve people and provide ablution facilities (hot showers and flush toilets), firewood and basic kitchen facilities. Water tanks are available at both facilities but depending on the season, the water quality is not guaranteed so it is recommended that the water is boiled first or treated with puritabs before drinking.

Douglas Smith Cottage (*Southern section*)

The cottage is a replica of the original homestead of the Smith family which was built in 1905 as was the fine cattle kraal close by. It is well worth spending time in this area and revelling in the past. The cottage was used when the family trekked their cattle from the cold Mooi River farm to overwinter in the relatively warmer Blinkwater farm. The trees in the Arboretum were planted by the Smiths at the same time the Botanical Garden in Pietermaritzburg was being developed at the turn of the century. The cottage is maintained by Mondi.

Mountain Falls (*Northern section*)

SAPPI have renovated a guest cottage adjacent to the old farmhouse. Vehicles can be safely left behind the cottage. An attractive dam a short distance from the overnight camp provides an ideal spot to complete the day, either swimming or contemplating the day spent and the day to come! Upstream from the overnight camp near a ruin, is a series of attractive waterfalls which give the area its name.

HIKING TRAIL DESCRIPTION AND ACCESS

The hiking trails can be split into two sections; the Southern Section (starting from Mondi Seele Workshop) and the Northern Section (starting from Mountain Falls Farmhouse).



Northern Section

DIRECTIONS TO MOUNTAIN FALLS:

There are various route options for getting to Mountain Falls Farmhouse.

1. From **Pietermaritzburg**, take the R33 towards Greytown, turning left just before Seven Oaks (on the P151) towards Rietvlei. About 15km down this road where it becomes a dirt road, look for the *Blinkwater Trails* sign to the left. * After crossing the Umvoti river (on the causeway) head up the hill and look for the sign to Mountain Falls on the left.
2. From **Howick**, take the tarred road to Karkloof, passing Mbona Mountain Estate (dirt road) then turning right at the turnoff to York and soon after left past Benvie Estate. Continue on the road and look for the sign to Mountain Falls on the right.
3. From **Greytown**, take the R622 towards Mooi River. After about 26km turn left onto the P151 (signed Seven Oaks) – this is a dirt road. ** Cross a railway line immediately after turning and stay on this road for approximately 8km down a very steep hill and soon after crossing the Umvoti River, turn right at the Upper Umvoti School. *Continue from * 1. above to arrive at Mountain Falls.*
4. From **Mooi River** (Johannesburg) take the R622 towards Greytown. After passing through Riet Vlei, follow the road for approximately 12km until you reach a sign *Blinkwater Trails* - turn right (this is a dirt road). *Continue from ** Point 3. above to arrive at Mountain Falls.*

Vehicles can be parked at this point.

KEYS

The keys for Mountain Falls will be available from the staff at the farmhouse on arrival.

TRAIL DESCRIPTION:

The route is demarcated with orange ribbon tied to a tree (forests) or arrows on a standard (grasslands).

There are two route options from Mountain Falls offering hikers an enjoyable walk to Douglas Smith Cottage. Option 1 (longer route) heading east via the top grasslands and down through the indigenous forest or Option 2 (shorter route) keeping right (Grid C-5) and back to Douglas Smith via the old wagon trail.

Option 1: Longer route to Douglas Smith from Mountain Falls

From Mountain Falls head up through the pine and gum plantations onto the grasslands. At the junction (Grid C-5) turn left, heading north east on the grasslands. Look for the path turning right (Grid D-3) which heads down a steep section of grassland and into the indigenous forest. The route exits onto the contour (old railway) path (Grid E-4). Keep right and continue through the indigenous forest which becomes grassland and a final section of plantation leading down to Douglas Smith Cottage.

Option 2: Shorter route to Douglas Smith

From Mountain Falls head up through the pine and gum plantations onto the grasslands. At the junction (Grid C-5) turn right (clockwise) heading south-east on the grasslands which leads up to the old wagon track (Grid B-6). From here turn left heading east, making the most of the magnificent views across Albert Falls Dam before entering the plantation which leads directly down to Douglas Smith Cottage.



Southern Section

DIRECTIONS TO DOUGLAS SMITH COTTAGE:

1. From **Pietermaritzburg** take the R33 towards Greytown. Just before entering New Hanover, look for the left turn (signed *Blinkwater Trails*) and follow this road (dirt) to the starting point at Mondi Seele Workshop.
2. From Tongaat (an option if travelling from **King Shaka International** airport / Ballito) take the R614 towards Wartburg, keeping right to Dalton. Drive through Dalton and at Frenzel's garage turn right to Seven Oaks. At the T-junction on the R33 (Pietermaritzburg – Greytown road) turn right towards Greytown. After about 1km turn left at the road signed Elandspruit. Continue on this (dirt) road until a T-junction and turn right into the Mondi-Seele Estate. Follow the road to the main office and workshop.
3. From the workshop, continue straight up the (plantation) road which gradually becomes steeper heading up the valley towards Douglas Smith Cottage. It's approx. 5-6km to the cottage from the workshop.

Vehicles can be parked at this point.

KEYS

The keys for Douglas Smith Cottage will be available from the caretaker on arrival at the cottage.

SUGGESTED ROUTES:

- A. Douglas Smith to Mountain Falls (overnight)
- B. Douglas Smith circular route back to Douglas Smith (overnight)

TRAIL DESCRIPTION:

The route is demarcated with orange ribbon tied to a tree (forests) or arrows on a standard (grasslands).

A. Douglas Smith to Mountain Falls (overnight) / 2 options

Various options from Douglas Smith allow hikers to take the longer (and more strenuous route) via the top of the Blinkwater Reserve or a shorter (more direct) route to Mountain Falls via the Old Wagon Track.

Option 1: Longer route to Mountain Falls via Blinkwater Reserve

Leaving the cottage, the trail leads through the cattle kraal and plantations for a short while, then it follows the route of the old railway line [*the railway line itself is not in existence. The path appears as a contour path*] through the grasslands before entering the forest. The grasslands offer superb views and there is a good chance of seeing common reedbuck and grey duiker. The railway line was built at the turn of the 20th century, when the people of York started a company to extract the fine timber from the forests for commercial purposes.

Enjoy the walk through this beautiful section of indigenous forest. Continuing with the railway line through the forest, there is evidence of old saw pits. The Blinkwater forest has a wealth of trees, all three yellowwoods; Cape Chestnuts, giant Strangler figs, Sneezewoods, Knobwoods and many others, together with the beautiful flowers to be found in the forests such as *Streptocarpus* and *Begonia sutherlandii*. Mosses, lichens and ferns complete the scene. The vociferous calls of the Knysna Turaco (*Lourie*) let you know that you have been seen, whilst the flocks of Crowned Guineafowl will make their presence known to you as they scuttle noisily away.

At the junction at Grid E-4 bear left; the route meanders upwards where orchids, figs and many other interesting plants can be found. Before exiting the forest there is a fascinating section of krantz. The trail exits the forest and leads on to the long grassland spur before reaching a junction (Grid D-3/4). Look for the right turn (Grid C-5) which leads to Mountain Falls through a pretty section of plantation.

Option 2: Shorter route to Mountain Falls

From Douglas Smith follow the road westerly through the beautiful Arboretum. Prepare for a hefty but rewarding uphill section along a road (the old wagon track) through a plantation. Exiting at the top on a grassland section, take time to enjoy the magnificent views across Albert Falls Dam. Continuing through the grasslands, this road is the old wagon track which was used for moving cattle from Mooi River during the winter months. On Grid B-6 the route turns a sharp right in a north-easterly direction and heads towards the junction to Mountain Falls. At this point the obvious route turns left off the grassland (Grid C-5) and into the gum and pine plantations down to Mountain Falls.

C. Douglas Smith circular route back to Douglas Smith (overnight)

Douglas Smith Cottage is a delightful spot to spend two (or more) nights. There are various route options which allow the hiker to venture out on day walks using Douglas Smith as a base camp. Be aware that the weather can change rapidly in this area from sunny skies to mist in a matter of hours – so be prepared and make sure you have a daypack along with a jacket and supply of food and water to take with you.



DAY WALKS

Day walks are only available from Mountain Falls Farmhouse (Northern section). This would be for those looking to drive in for the day, park at Mountain Falls and walk from there to return to the same point and depart before night fall. It is possible to spend the night at Mountain Falls whilst enjoying out and back day walks from this point but this is considered as an overnight hike and as such, a booking is required.

Park your vehicle at Mountain Falls and sign the register before heading out on your day walk.

Be aware that the road to Mountain Falls can be difficult in the rainy season or when felling is taking place. Please check with Elise Stolz before arriving.

Depending on fitness levels, the day walker can enjoy a short meander up through the pine and gum plantations to the upper grasslands and the top of the Blinkwater with magnificent views. Those wishing to do a longer walk can continue on the top of the Blinkwater, following the edge of the grassland plateau, while skirting the forest and looking down across Albert Falls Dam and surrounds in the distance. The grasslands are interspersed with pockets of indigenous bush. Reedbuck are often seen as are Jackal Buzzards, Steppe Buzzards and occasionally a Fish Eagle will make its' presence known. Crowned and Long Crested Eagles are often seen, besides the many grassland birds, Cisticola's, Francolins, Chats, amongst many more. For the fit and adventurous an extended loop to the radio tower at the tip of the Blinkwater will make for a full day out before returning back to Mountain Falls.



This area has the potential as a prime mountain biking destination. The plan is to develop marked routes for mountain bikers to enjoy this scenic area whilst making use of the accommodation at either Douglas Smith Cottage or Mountain Falls camp.



TRAIL ETIQUETTE

Help us build the trail, add your stone to the cairns.

Remember; litter is offensive to this pristine environment. Take only photographs and leave only footprints.

NO DOGS ALLOWED on the trail.

PLEASE NOTE -Due to forest felling operations, the trail may have to be re-routed from time to time. Please follow the hazard tape markers should this be the case. Some plantation areas indicated on the map may have been felled in which case they will look different in reality.



BOOKINGS & CONTACT

TRAIL FEES:

Overnight hikes:

R150 per person per night.

Booking required.

Day walks:

R50 per adult, R30 per child (U12)

Pay cash on arrival at Mountain Falls Farmhouse & sign the day register.



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Blinkwater Trails is a non-profit organisation.

All proceeds generated are channelled back into trail maintenance and improvements.