Northern Branch of ArchSoc: Artefacts



Rock paintings of the Kaingo Game Reserve in the Waterberg

Tour guided by Professor Lyn Wadley: 19 – 21 June 2026

Fresh off the launch of Professor Lyn Wadley's latest book, *Rock Art of the Waterberg: Rites and Transformation*, co-authored with Dr Ghilraen Laue, members of the Northern Branch embarked for a weekend away at Kaingo Private Game Reserve in the Waterberg. This is one of the places where Lyn and her team recorded sites that are discussed in her book. To date, they have recorded 56 new rock art sites, bringing the total known in the Waterberg to 127 sites in 101 localities.

Kaingo is a 16 000 ha wildlife reserve, set to expand to 24 000 ha by the end of 2026, located in the western Waterberg along the Mokolo River. It boasts the Big Five, two luxury lodges, a brand-new research centre and several scenic vistas. It also happens to be a cultural landscape with evidence of occupation dating back to the Acheulean. The more recent cultural history of the region includes rock paintings attributable to Bushmen, Khoekhoe and Northern Sotho peoples, who all inhabited the landscape over the last two thousand years.

Lyn likens the sharing of the same space by these three different groups to a 'timeshare', whereby one group might come in for a few weeks in the summer and use a rock shelter for a certain purpose, say boys' initiation, and then leave. Another group might then use the same shelter as a camp for the winter months before they too would move on.

Despite being in the middle of June, the weather in the Waterberg was fine (except for the icy nip in the back of the game vehicle). We were accommodated at Kaingo's new research centre, in the heart of the reserve. This is a state-of-the-art compound for researchers working at Kaingo, whether on the flora, fauna or cultural heritage of the reserve. The centre is replete with its own laboratory, seminar room, mini library, curation facility and accommodation. It also has a magnificent view over the Mokolo River. Being fenced in, one is free to walk around perfectly safe from the larger predators and more dangerous animals on the reserve – although it does not stop the odd snake, even in June.

After enjoying a splendid dinner on the Friday evening, we were treated to two excellent presentations in the new seminar room by Dr Nico Lübcker, head of research at Kaingo, and Lyn Wadley, who unpacked the history of the Waterberg as evidenced by some of the sites that she had excavated. The Waterberg project aims to better understand when and how people occupied this region over hundreds of thousands of years.

The following day, we set out to look at three sites. The first was Welgevonden, a modest rock overhang, with some red finger paintings on the walls. In front of it, a member of Lyn's team found some large Acheulean cores. One of the more unusual rock paintings, a little way off from the main overhang, is a panel depicting several men (brush-painted) each carrying a small pick in each hand. One could almost hear the men singing, "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho; It's off to work we go". On the ridge above the site are several natural rock cisterns, which may have served a ritual purpose during rain-making ceremonies. On the way up to see the cisterns, Lyn regaled us with a story of an encounter with a leopard that she and her team had while excavating Welgevonden – a reminder that despite the scenic beauty we were in fact in the middle of a Big Five game reserve and a near-death experience can lurk around any corner.

Next we were taken to see Dwaalhoek, the site that Lyn and her team are in the process of excavating. The shelter contains white finger-painted initiation art linked to Iron Age farmers, while a nearby panel features fine-line Bushman paintings associated with spiritual beliefs and rituals. Although the upper deposits of the site date to the Iron Age, Lyn believes that it contains a deep sequence that may shed more light on why people have been attracted to the Waterberg for such a long time, and how they used the environment to their advantage. It may also provide evidence as to why the region was seemingly abandoned for such a long time between the end of the Pleistocene and the late Holocene period.

After lunch, which we enjoyed all the more because of the spectacular view of elephants grazing on the banks of the Mokolo River as it snaked its way between the mountains, Lyn took us to see Kaingo Sheep Rock Shelter. This impressive site, which is accessed by climbing down a ladder set up between the boulders in the krans sloping down to the river, is watched over by an almost life-sized painting of a fat-tailed sheep (along with many other painted depictions). The site has proved incredibly rich in material artefacts, which, along with the super-positioning of the paintings, suggests some cross-cultural contact – perhaps bearing testament to use of the site by different groups at different times.

On the Sunday morning, we departed Kaingo early to visit yet another site, called Taaibos, located on a neighbouring farm. Accessing this site proved challenging for some, whose courage failed them after witnessing one of our guides fall into a stream three times while attempting to help us ford this little obstacle. In the event, only six of us made it across, the rest opting for the much longer (and bumpier) Land Rover conveyance. We reached the rock shelter after clambering up the side of a steep ravine, during which effort we lost a few of the more faint of heart and weak of limb. The site that awaited those who reached the top was as spectacular as the previous sites we had seen. According to Lyn, Taaibos is the site most likely to have been associated, at some point, with actual Khoekhoe herders. The walls of the shelter were decorated with many hand prints, finger dots, and an unusual panel of white figures holding hands like a paper doll cut-out.

Thus ended what was a lovely weekend away in the Waterberg. With beautiful scenery, rich cultural heritage, and a proficient and knowledgeable guide, this trip exemplified the benefits of being a member of the South African Archaeological Society.



Figure 1. Professor Lyn Wadley showing us Welgevonden rock shelter where she and her team had previously excavated. The leopard incident occurred only a few dozen metres from where she is standing.



Figure 2. The image of the 'miners' carrying items that look like picks a little way off from Welgevonden rock shelter.



Figure 3. Lyn introducing us the Dwaalhoek shelter where she and her team are preparing to return in September to recommence excavations.



Figure 4. (Left) The view from where we had lunch, overlooking the Mokolo River. (Right) See if you can spot the herd of elephants among the trees, coming down to the river to drink.

Report and photos by Justin Bradfield



Figure 5. Lyn showing us the impressive sheep paintings that give Kaingo Sheep Rock Shelter its name.



Figure 6. Lyn at Taaibos Shelter showing us one of the bored (in this case partially bored) stone discs that are found in the area.