It was an icy winter’s day on 23 July when Karoo National Park hosted a group of journalists from across the country on a trip to meet their famous lion. The public knows him as “Sylvester”, as he was dubbed in the media, but inside the Park, he goes by the name of “Spook” – as he was barely seen throughout the 24 days he spent on the loose, leaving behind only sporadic spoor for his trackers to follow.

Spook went on a walkabout on 5 June, escaping under an electric fence after some of the soil had washed away after heavy rain. He had dozens of people and six dogs searching for him – on foot, in vehicles and from the air, all the while killing numerous farmers’ sheep and a kudu along the way, until his eventual darting and recapture on 29 June.

More than a month later, Sylvester is still in the Park’s boma where he’s been since. He now sports a satellite tracking collar, so there’s never again any doubt about his whereabouts. A few days before our visit, his sister is believed to have paid him a short visit at the boma, where they apparently spent a few minutes glaring at each other through the fence. While here, he regularly gets fed an assortment of game every few days.

Park Manager, Nico van der Walt, says a decision has not yet been made about his future – whether that will be in the Park or if he’ll be relocated to another one.

On the same night, in the media’s presence, Nico and the Park’s Honorary Rangers hosted the majority of the people involved in the search for Sylvester to a “thank you” dinner. Nico put together and presented an exciting photographic slideshow of the 24-day adventure, as well as some of the humorous comics which appeared in the media over the time. He thanked everyone who had gathered for their commitment to get Spook, as they call him, back to the Park safely. Nico, too, was thanked by all for leading from the front, day in and day out.

Hopefully by the next edition we’ll know where Spook will spend the rest of his days. For now, he’s safely tucked away somewhere in Karoo National Park, confined to his high security boma, tracking collar and all…
Compliments received

Addo Elephant National Park
• Lovely and peaceful visit. 10 out of 10. Thank you.
• The staff were very friendly and efficient at Cattle Baron.
• Your staff are amazing and so helpful. I had wanted to get another chalet for my parents who were accompanying us (a last minute arrangement) but all your units were full. Your staff were amazing in bringing additional mattresses and bedding to the chalet. We are most grateful.

Karoo National Park
• We spent a night at Karoo National Park and were delighted to see the changes to the fencing arrangement around the rest camp, which now incorporates the campsite. On our last visit a couple of years ago the campsite was separately fenced and we missed being able to walk beyond the campsite, which had been possible before the introduction of lion. At the time we weren't sure about returning to the campsite, but now we definitely will do so. Keep up the great work.

Mountain Zebra National Park
• We always enjoy our visits!
• In 2014 I mentioned dirty windows in the chalets. Since then we have visited about six times and windows have always been cleaned – well done!
• We love this place.
• I would like to extend a word of thanks to all the people at the Park. Having been in the hospitality business for six years, it is very easy for me to pick up if a team likes what they are doing and if they work well together - it shows up immediately in the way the guests feel when they visit the establishment. I would like to commend you all on doing an outstanding job of making us feel very welcome and at home. From the Receptionist to the waiters at the restaurant - a very big thank you. I would also like to thank Charl, our guide for the hike and for the game drive, for making it a very pleasant hike and an outstanding experience from TripAdvisor travellers who have visited this beautiful part of the Karoo.

TripAdvisor Award – two years in a row
For the second consecutive year, Karoo National Park has been awarded a certificate of excellence, based on ratings by guests on the world’s largest travel site. TripAdvisor enables travelers to plan and experience the perfect trip by offering trusted advice from real travelers and a wide variety of travel choices and planning features with seamless links to booking tools.

The award forms part of TripAdvisor’s campaign of celebrating hospitality excellence around the world. This prestigious award is based on the quality of reviews and opinions earned on TravelAdvisor over the past year and signifies that the Park has consistently earned outstanding feedback from TripAdvisor travellers who have visited this beautiful part of the Karoo.

Karoo National Park celebrated World Ranger Day on 31 July. Staff held a candlelight vigil for rangers who lost their lives in the line of duty, whereafter the ranger corps put on a drill demonstration to the rest of the staff members.

Paper added to list of recycled items in Karoo
Glass, plastic and can recycling started in the Park a number of years ago. Staff have now added paper to this list, thanks to recycling boxes provided for all the offices from the Department of Environmental Affairs.

People and Conservation staff, Esna van Zyl and Jan Jacobs and Section Ranger, Samuel Tompies, gladly received the boxes from the DEA’s Barbara Brown.

Heaps of fun had at Camdeboo National Park’s holiday programme
Young participates in Camdeboo National Park’s June holiday programme were kept thoroughly entertained during the course of the week from 29 June to 3 July. The programmes were presented by Rosemary Scheepers (Senior People & Conservation Officer), Zimkhitha Zungula (Assistant People & Conservation Officer), Demitri Williams (Environmental Education Centre Supervisor) and Conservation students Linda Sigwela and Namhla Kutuka.

Each day of the week had its own theme, with fun activities and games played according to these every day. On Yellow Mellow Monday, the children learned about all things yellow in nature and got to make their own leaf sun catcher. Exploring Plants Tuesday was presented by Namhla, who gave the youngsters a presentation on plants, whereafter they got to make their own cooldrink bottle greenhouses, in which they planted a spekboom. On Sneaky Snake Wednesday they were treated to an interactive presentation on snakes by Linda and they followed this up with making their own snake finger puppets. Under the Sea Thursday saw Zimkhita teaching them about sea life along South Africa’s coasts before they made some great paper plate fish tanks of their own. Funfair Friday tested the kids’ knowledge, involved cupcake decorating, concerts and finally prize giving.
Nelson Mandela International Day was launched in recognition of former president Nelson Mandela’s birthday on 18 July, 2009 via a unanimous decision of the UN General Assembly. It was inspired by a call he made a year earlier, for the next generation to take on the burden of leadership in addressing the world’s social injustices when he said that “it is in your hands now”.

It is more than a celebration of Madiba’s life and legacy. It is a global movement to honour his life’s work and act to change the world for the better.

Each year, the world over, people spend 67 minutes of their day on 18 July, giving back to the needy. We at SANParks are no different. Staff in each of our Parks gathered around this date, and did their bit for their communities:

Karoo National Park

The Park’s People & Conservation Department and Biodiversity Social Projects teamed up to assist in two Beaufort West communities on Mandela Day. The theme for the day was “Take Action – Inspire Change – Make Every Day a Mandela Day”.

Along with the Department of Environmental Affairs and the local municipality, they built the foundation for a water tank and cleaned the yard of Huis Johannes, a home for the aged. They also laid down paving around the United Reformed Church in town.

Camdeboo National Park

Staff honoured Madiba’s legacy this year by visiting Vuyani Safe Haven. They spent time playing fun games with the older children and spent quality time looking after and playing with the little babies.

In the lead-up to Mandela Day, the Park’s staff collected non-perishable food, and handed these over to the Haven’s management on the day.

Addo Elephant National Park

Three of the oldest women around the Park were treated to a day outing to Addo this year. All three women are 100 years old – Margaret Mhlaba from Bersheba, Maria van Heerden from Bergsig and Francis Dukes from Enon. While in the Park, they were treated to a game drive and had lunch at the Cattle Baron restaurant.

The Park also donated a bed to each of the women, and money collected from staff was used to buy groceries, which were delivered to the ladies and their families at the end of July.

Mountain Zebra National Park

Park staff celebrated Mandela Day in Hillside in Cradock, refurbishing the home of a 95-year-old citizen, Nombono Mzimkhulu. They put up and painted a ceiling in the lounge and kitchen area (where there was none before), painted the inside and outside of the house, including the window frames and weeded and cleaned up the grounds around the house.

Mrs Mzimkhulu was very grateful for the support, saying “I thank the Park for the work it has done. My house was not in a good condition”. The park liaised with the ward councillor, Siphiwo Njobo, to identify the person in most need of assistance in the area. He thanked the Park for their work on the day and for always being so actively involved in his ward.

Celebrating Mandela Day
Welcome to the Karoo!

Karoo National Park welcomes Field Guide, Melissa du Toit, to their fold. She was previously based in Nossob (Kgalagadi) and brings with her a wealth of knowledge and experience. Melissa has settled in well as is already quite at home and part of the Karoo family.

Large and conspicuous birds offer the opportunity to monitor their populations by means of relatively simple techniques. One of these techniques is the “road count”, in which observations are made from vehicles covering fixed routes. It is these large birds that are showing signs of threat due to loss of habitat through changes in land use, increases in crop agriculture and human population densities, poisoning as well as man-made structures like power lines. With the prospect of wind and solar farms to increase our use of renewable energy sources, monitoring of these species is most important.

Karoo National Park’s Junior Rangers participated in the Co-ordinated avifaunal road count (CAR) at the end of July. CAR monitors 36 species of large terrestrial birds (cranes, bustards, korhaans, storks, Secretary birds and Southern Bald Ibis) along 350 fixed routes covering over 19 000 km (the flight distance between Cape Town, London and back). Twice a year, in mid-summer (the last Saturday in January) and mid-winter (the last Saturday in July), road counts are carried out. The project also reveals details of habitat use and the relationship of populations to the agricultural practices of an area.

Senior People and Conservation Officer, Esna van Zyl, says the will participate in the project annually going forward. She says even though the learners were out in the park in extremely cold conditions, they all still thoroughly enjoyed the exercise.

Winter snow!

Snow fell overnight on 30 July in Mountain Zebra and Karoo National Parks. MZNP Park Manager, Megan Taplin, said the best views were from the Kranskop loop. In Karoo, meanwhile it could clearly be seen from rest camp.

Night time shenanigans in Mountain Zebra

I’ve always maintained that the best night drives are to be had in Mountain Zebra National Park. I was proven right again during July when two aardwolf were seen mating on a drive after dark. This is quite an unusual sighting, says Field Guide, Dan van de Vyfer. Seeing one aardwolf is special enough, never mind what the guests on that drive were treated to.

Meanwhile, Honorary Ranger, Willem Johannes Olivier, says he had a similar sighting of mating aardwolf in a different section of the park, while on fence patrol one night.

Seems there’ll be lots of little ones to look out for soon...

Youngsters participate in bird census

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Running in the wild!

The annual Beaufort West half marathon took place on 25 July. As in previous years, a part of the run/walk once again took place in Karoo National Park, where the Honorary Rangers put up a water point along the route.