Frontier Region staff walked away with four awards from this year’s 13th annual SANParks Kudu Awards evening. The evening was hosted at the CSIR International Convention Centre on 23 November.

Only the cream of South Africa’s conservation crop is recognised at the gala event every year. It is without a doubt the highlight of a staff member’s career when they’re invited to the event as finalists, and even more so when they win for their hard work and dedication. The awards are supported by First National Bank (FNB) and Total South Africa.

Recognition in one of the night’s categories, the CEO’s Awards, is bestowed on the organisation’s best performing individuals and teams from the previous financial year. They would all already have been honoured at Regional Awards events earlier in the year. From the list of regional award winners, only the top performers were sent through to the shortlist for the national awards.

Karoo National Park staff received two awards on the evening. The Park’s Technical Department was recognised for being the Best Performing Business Unit throughout the organisation. Headed up by Dewald Duimpies, he and his three-man team are known for their speedy turnaround time on technical issues throughout the Park.

The other award for the evening went to Damon frieslaar, the Park’s General Worker, the proud recipient of an Excellent Performance in the Workplace award. Damon was nominated regionally and nationally for being an extremely active and hardworking employee, both within his job description and wherever else assistance was needed.

Garden Route National Park’s Elfriede Sack also won in this category. Elfriede, as the Finance Control Officer for the Wilderness Section of the Park, showed above average dedication to her job and goes beyond what is expected from her.

Camdeboo National Park’s nine Environmental Monitors, led by Sergeant James Maarman, received the CEO’s Award for Best Performing Ranger Post of the Year, after their regional win in the same category in August. Since their appointment, the team has been credited with practically eradicating any incidents of illegal activities within the Park’s borders.

Fundisile Mketeni, SANParks CEO, said that the Kudu Awards recognises internal and external stakeholders for their vital contribution in making South African National Parks the custodian of choice for the national parks system in South Africa.
Compliment of the month

Garden Route National Park – Wilderness section

Personally and on behalf of my 20 ‘Ndumu Club’ colleagues who have just enjoyed four nights at Ebb and Flow, during a period of very wet weather, I would like to express my highest praise and thanks for the outstanding co-operation and customer care rendered by the management and staff of what has to be considered to be one of, if not the best, SANParks camps in the country.

We are a very experienced group who have visited many of the national and provincial parks in the past 34 years of the Club’s existence and many more in our individual capacities. Many of our members have held high office in conservation bodies such as WESSA, Botsoc and Birdlife.

Our members from both KZN and the Cape have been unanimous in their praise for the exceptional management of the camp and the friendly and helpful attitude of all the staff with whom we came in contact. Furthermore, despite the heavy rain for most of the time, we were most impressed at the high standard of development and maintenance of the camp itself, the surrounding ‘Kingfisher’ trails and the bird hides.

Many of the KZN trailists expressed the view that they would definitely come back to this area with their families and, from a personal view, the fact that I have visited Ebb and Flow four times recently and organised the WESSA Western Cape Region’s AGM there in March speaks for itself. I will be back in the Garden Route and Addo with overseas visitors again in January as a result of knowing that our experiences will be of the highest standard.

Thank you Team SANParks Garden Route: Well done!

John Green
Camp Liaison Officer 2017 Ndumu Club Trail #34

MZNP celebrates international Cheetah Day

As the world celebrated International Cheetah Day on Monday 4 December, Mountain Zebra National Park (MZNP) outside Cradock in the Eastern Cape also celebrated ten years since the reintroduction of the species in 2007 after being absent from the plains of the Karoo for 130 years.

The Park has enjoyed a number of successes with cheetah since the arrival of two male and two female cheetah a decade ago – most notably being able to boast that it is the only national park to offer a cheetah tracking activity and also that it has been instrumental in contributing towards national initiatives to conserve the species through working with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT).

“It is South African National Parks policy to reintroduce wildlife species which would have occurred in an area before hunting or habitat loss forced them to local extinction in earlier centuries,” says Head of Corporate Communications, Janine Raftopoulos.

Since their introduction, the Park’s cheetah population thrived, with the birth of 29 cubs within the first five years. To curb them from interbreeding, the animals are regularly relocated to a number of different reserves throughout South Africa – contributing significantly to the EWT’s Cheetah Metapopulation Project. “This project ensures adequate genetic viability and contributes towards national initiatives to conserve the species, and entails the management of over 300 cheetah on more than 50 small fenced reserves throughout South Africa,” continues Raftopoulos.

Only a few cheetah can be sustained at any given time – dependent on the prey populations in the Park. Depending on these numbers, animals may have to be moved to or from other reserves. SANParks manages all predators in terms of social units and by mimicking natural processes.

There are currently six cheetah in the Park, of which two are collared and are the cheetah guests can encounter should they participate in the cheetah tracking activity, which is what MZNP is renowned for. “The tracking involves guests going out in a game drive vehicle with a trained guide who then tries to pick up the signal on his telemetry device which is emitted from the collars of the animals. Cheetah tracking also includes a game drive where guides showcase the natural flora and fauna in the Park.”

Message from Dries Engelbrecht, Regional General Manager

Just as I start forgetting about our annual Regional Awards evening, which took place in August, at which the Frontier’s top performing employees are honoured for their hard work and dedication, the national SANParks Kudu Awards rolls around and I am once again humbled by the wonderful staff in our parks.

This year was no different. We are so proud of all this year’s winners from across the organisation, but more so of our own Frontier staff. Elfriede Sack, Damon Plaatjies, James Maarman and his team of Environmental Monitors and the Karoo Technical Department who have done us proud. This year’s competition in the CEO’s Award categories was tough, but they clearly stood out as the best of what SANParks has to offer. CONGRATULATIONS!!!

Last week we celebrated International Cheetah Day in Mountain Zebra National Park by hosting a group of 11 journalists in the Park. We really are proud of what has been achieved here over the past ten years, since cheetah were first re-introduced to the area, and we look forward to what is yet to come.

Our SANParks Honorary and Junior Rangers have also been exceptionally busy over the past while. You’ll read all about their activities between pg 3 and 5. We are grateful to these group of conservation volunteers for all they do in assisting our Parks and happy to read that the younger generation is getting involved at an early stage.

With that, I’d like to wish you and your families the best over the upcoming festive season. Be safe and enjoy this special time of year until we publish again in 2018!

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Congratulations! Matthew Mbatyazwa was recently certified by Sea Rescue. He is seen in the picture congratulated by Paddy Gordon’s PA, Geneve Luppacchini.

The sixth annual Mountain Zebra National Park birding weekend was held over the weekend of 3 and 4 November. A total of 218 species were spotted over the weekend, bringing the tally of birds spotted over the past six events to 282. A total of 42 birders in 13 groups participated in the competition. The winning group from Port Elizabeth spotted 133 species, the group who took second place spotted 122 species and third place 118. Some of the new species included were Spur-winged goose, red-billed teal, red-billed firefinch, common greenshank and wattled starling.

A photographic competition was also held, with the winning photo being that of a dragon fly entered by Tommie Olivier, one of the Rhino Rangers from Karel Theron Primary School (additional story on page 5).

There were four fires in the Outeniqua mountains in early November - North of Gouna on MTO land, Molen River where the fire started on private land and jumped to SANParks property, Spitskop fire (not the iconic tourist attraction) where there was a fire and Dubbelberg Fire on private property.

Len du Plessis, Planning Manager of the Garden Route National Park, says SANParks focused on Spitskop. This was done to protect private infrastructure north of the mountain summit. SANParks also dispatched a Huey, which had to be diverted to Gouna where MTO plantations started burning. A team from Farleigh and the local Fire Protection Association had to rotate 12-hour shifts attending to the fire.

The Molen River fire that started on private land was slowly burning into SANParks land. A bakkie with SANParks personnel were stationed at Windmeulnek to monitor the fire. This fire however had the potential to cause extensive damage to private property north of the mountain. A team from the Eden District Municipality was roped in to suppress active fires on private land.

The Dubbelberg fire was also under the management of the Eden District team and PG Bison.

Teams from SANParks in Diepwalle assisted with a fire in Gouna with their fire tanker. This fire had already caused significant damage to MTO plantations and had the potential to cause more damage if not contained quickly.

Karoo snow in November

Years ago, snow in South Africa was unheard of, not to mention snow in the Karoo. However, over the past few years, some of the high lying peaks have been known to receive a light dusting over the winter months. Imagine the surprise Karoo National Park staff and guests had when they woke up to snow over the Nuweveld mountain range on 14 November – only two weeks away from summer.

The majority of the country experienced a cold snap with heavy rain over this period, and the Karoo was no different. That morning, Park Manager, Nico van der Walt, said the rest camp received 35mm of rain overnight, while 46mm fell at the Grantham Environmental Education Centre deeper into the Park. The Leesrivier was also flowing steadily by 8AM that morning. Rain continued falling throughout the day.

The rain was welcome relief, as the area had been struggling with a near-crippling drought. Data collected in the Park indicates that there has been a drop in the water table of the boreholes. The Park has no permanent fresh water (dams) and manages a number of artificial water points. They do, however, have a few springs in the higher laying areas of the Park and on the middle plateau, which alleviates the situation to an extent, but some of these have also dried up lately.

MZNP Birding Weekend

Oudtshoorn fires

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Mountain Zebra National Park’s Senior Section Ranger, Greg Bond, reports that he saw his first hedgehog one evening on the way home. How cute is this little guy/girl?

The Graaff-Reinet Heritage Society and a number of individuals from the Graaff-Reinet community donated R15 000 towards the finishing touches of Camdeboo National Park’s Winterhoek guesthouse on 17 November. The group launched the fundraising drive a number of years ago when South African National Parks and Camdeboo National Park first started with the restoration of Winterhoek. A sum of R9 000 was collected and the Executive Committee dedicated a further R6 000 towards the fund. The Society is grateful to the donors for their generosity and wishes to thank the following individuals: Mrs. C. Brodie, Mr. P. Burdett, Mr. A. Collett, Mr. T. Eksteen, Mr. J. Feek, Ms. S Grindley, Mr. B Hough, Mrs. T. Pitman, Mrs. V. Loock, Mrs. S. Tilney and Mr. G. van Niekerk.

The cheque was handed over to SANParks Regional General Manager, Dries Engelbrecht and Park Manager, Mzwandile Mjadu, by the Graaff-Reinet Heritage Society’s Chairperson, Theuns Eksteen and Treasurer, Peter Whittlock at the Park’s admin building.

Engelbrecht thanked the group and everyone who donated to the fund, saying “We are very grateful for your most generous handover today. Your donation will go a long way towards speeding up the finer details around the renovation of Winterhoek, before we can officially open it to guests.”

The Touws River estuary breached in Wilderness.

Wilderness after the rain

Both the Swartvlei and Touws River estuaries were breached subsequent to heavy rainfall in mid-November. The Swartvlei Estuary system was monitored for 24 hours and the following rainfall was recorded:

- Farleigh till 07:00 on the 15th of November 2017 - 48mm
- Sedgefield - 63mm

Water height before the rain was at 1.74m above mean sea level. However at 18:00 - 1.79m and at 22:00 - 1.79m, at 01:00 - 1.79m, but at 06:30am - 1.80m.

- Touw River - 24 hour rain at Buffelskop till 07:00 - 33mm and water level at Ebb & Flow rest camp - 1.99m
- Goudwold (forest) - 54mm of rain measured
- Diepwalle (Knysna forest) - 50mm
- Knysna (Thesen Island jetty) - 35mm

Garden Route National Park Manager, Paddy Gordon, affirmed the significance of keeping the mouth closed until the correct time and level of water measured above mean sea level. Swartvlei was ranked number seven in South Africa by independent researchers for its biological diversity. “Managing the system is complex, but the water measured facilitated the decision to breach/open both the Swartvlei and Touws River mouths,” he said.

Sedgefield residents came out in numbers to witness the breaching of the Swartvei estuary. Channels were reportedly prepared days before and machinery was on standby.

Scientist, Dr. Ian Russel, cautions against opening the mouth too soon as during the open and closed phase there is a unique ecological process that collectively works together to maintain a delicate foodweb. The estuary mouth will generally close naturally during the low rainfall periods as there is a reduction of the inflow of freshwater.

The closed phase is a time of ‘rest and recovery’ when some interesting and important ecological processes come into play.

Karoo Junior Rangers’ impressive bird identification skills

Karoo National Park’s Junior Rangers participated in the annual Honorary Rangers Birding Weekend competition towards the end of October. The group identified a total of 52 different species – not bad for their first attempt, says Senior People and Conservation Officer, Esna van Zyl. Each of the learners received a certificate of participation – and looked mightily impressive in their new uniforms.

Graaff-Reinet donates towards Winterhoek guest house restoration

The Graaff-Reinet Heritage Society and a number of individuals from the Graaff-Reinet community donated R15 000 towards the finishing touches of Camdeboo National Park’s Winterhoek guesthouse on 17 November. The group launched the fundraising drive a number of years ago when South African National Parks and Camdeboo National Park first started with the restoration of Winterhoek.

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Hedgehog cuteness in MZNP

Mountain Zebra National Park’s Senior Section Ranger, Greg Bond, reports that he saw his first hedgehog one evening on the way home. How cute is this little guy/girl?
The Mighty Elephants show their might

Addo Elephant National Park’s soccer team, the Mighty Elephants, put on a fine display at a recent Wellness Day tournament, proving exactly where they got their name from.

The event was hosted by the Sundays River Valley Municipality in Kirkwood on 18 November. Participants were Correctional Services, the SAPS, Department of Health, Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality, Sundays River Valley Municipality and of course, SANParks.

The Mighty Elephants made it through the knockout rounds and all the way to the finals, where they defeated their hosts by 4 - 2 and brought the gold medals and trophy home.

Well done, team, on flying the SANParks flag high!

Junior Rangers in the making

A group of Grade 6 learners, the Rhino Rangers from Karel Theron Primary School in Middelburg, started with a project to raise funds for rhino protection in 2016. On 13 November, the now Grade 7 learners handed over a donation of R6 140.45 to the SANParks Honorary Rangers Mountain Zebra region.

The Honorary Rangers will use these funds to purchase a wish list item that Mountain Zebra National Park needs for the anti-poaching programme. Thank you very much to these learners for their initiative. Also, thank you to the staff and school principal, Johan Allers, for allowing the learners and their parents to run the project.

Progress in Harkerville after the Knysna Fires

The largest part of the Garden Route National Park affected by the Knysna fires in June is in the Harkerville section, making up a portion of the Knysna forests and fynbos areas. Harkerville is an activity hub for nature and is known for its blue duiker population. Zoned off areas for tourism include hiking and world-famous cycling routes. All cycling routes and hiking routes are open, except the two-day Harkerville Coastal hiking route.

Kranshoek picnic area
The picnic area is open for use. However, there are portable toilets for visitors to use after the fire burnt the old toilet block. SANParks is fast-tracking the procurement process of new water tanks to provide drinking water by mid-December.

Kranshoek trail
The Kranshoek Trail is still closed, as maintenance work is currently underway. Rebuilding and rehabilitating the route will probably continue until the end of December. The trail should be up and running by the end January. There is a clear sign at the entrance and parking area to inform the public of closure and maintenance of routes.

Kranshoek viewpoint
The viewpoint is still closed and not accessible to visitors as yet. This will remain as such until management and scientists have finalised urgent deliverables pertaining to the area.

Harkerville trail
The coastal portion of the trail is still closed. An alternative scenic route was opened along the coastal ridge.

Additional efforts to assist the town of Knysna after the fires included post-fire assessments with Geographical Information Systems (GIS). This played an important role in determining high-risk areas in urgent need of immediate rehabilitation. GIS technology is used to capture, analyse and present digital geographic data.

A Garden Route Rebuild structure made up of various partners was established. It is led by the Provincial Department of the Western Cape:

• High risk erosion sites were identified through field surveys and this process is ongoing;
• Erosion mitigation materials (sediment retention fibre rolls and carpets) has been received from Department of Environmental Affairs;
• Training was completed for the installation of erosion mitigation materials;
• The installation of erosion materials has commenced in high risk erosion areas;
• Invasive alien plant control in the burnt scar can only commence after some regrowth – 3 - 6 month window; and
• A project proposal for erosion mitigation and invasive alien plant management has been submitted to the National Disaster Management Committee for emergency funding.

Ladies’ wellness in Wilderness

In the light of October being Breast Cancer Awareness month, a Wellness Day for women from the Wilderness Section of Garden Route National Park was held on 26 October. During the event a Women’s Forum committee was elected and an overview was given about the purpose of the forum. Emphasis was put on the important role of women in the workplace and at home, as well as creating sound trust relationships in the workplace. In aid of breaking the work routine and creating interaction with colleagues in a totally different space and on different terms, an informal space was created for the women to be a part of fun activities in a relaxed manner. All were treated to makeovers including a manicure or a pedicure, sponsored by Old Mutual.

After the pamper session a short “Cansurvive” video was shared with the ladies. This video is about a group of people who were diagnosed with cancer and went on a bike road trip, with one of the main purposes of the road trip being to create cancer awareness. Elsje Swart, who participated in the bike road trip, was a speaker at the event and shared her powerful, personal and inspiring experience as a cancer survivor. Thereafter five women from the Wilderness staff participated in the Cancer Fun Walk/Run in support and honor of breast cancer survivors.

Some of the happy Wilderness staff and BSP projects ladies after their pamper sessions