

July Camp 2016

by Rikki Abbott Wedderburn

This year July Camp was held at Lotheni in the Southern Drakensberg and, by all accounts, was a most enjoyable event.

We continued the happy trend of recent years of hosting an increasing number of very young Campers. We strongly believe that this ensures not only the future of July Camp, but also of the Mountain Club. In this regard, it was very pleasing that about a dozen people asked for MCSA KZN member-ship forms.

Grateful thanks go to our President, Murray Saunders, who shared the concern of the July Camp organisers over the low number of KZN Section members who attended July Camp. He started by pro-actively challenging all the KZN Section Committee members to attend the opening weekend and had a very pleasing response. This in turn rubbed off on Section members and we had more Section members attending than has been the case for many years. A special surprise was a non-member who had been to the PMB Slide Show where Ian Bailey, who organises and presents these monthly events, mentioned July Camp. This so appealed to him that he and his young son came along on the off-chance that they would be accepted, but brought all their own food, just in case. July Camp has a happy tradition of not turning people away, so he was accepted into the body of the kirk. He has already applied for membership and been accepted! We also had more overseas visitors than in the past which was rather fun.

It was also special in that, at last, we have broken through the colour bar. Thanks to the commitment of Taffy, Miles and Afifa, and their intention to come back again next year with more of their hiking friends. We hope that that they will become regular July Campers and that their numbers will grow. Thanks to three special people.

Another happy first was that after years of trying to establish contact with the Scouts and Cubs, this year we seem to have pushed the right button and had a thrilling response. A party of 25 Cubs, Scouts, leaders and parents came for the second weekend of Camp. They all seem to have enjoyed it very much and are eager to be back again next year. They scored a huge hit with the Organisers when some of them came back on the last day of the Camp to help with dismantling the Camp. Any help in this regard is always much appreciated.

In the end, despite having had a very slow start to the bookings, the Camp was well attended with the final number of man-nights increasing during the Camp as we welcomed first-timers and old friends who made spur of the moment decisions to join us. Fortunately, we had sufficient food and our chef, Vusi Ndlovu, son of the legendary Ishmael Ndlovu, took all in his stride and produced tasty and satisfying meals that astonished newcomers and kept the regulars coming back for second helpings.

Graham Smith led a very fit young party to the top of the escarpment and all returned very pleased with their trip. Other sub-camping parties were led by Norman Owen Smith, Liz Warren, Gerhard Venter and Rod Saunders. Every day saw at least

The Dinner Bell

one day-hike party going out and these were led *Photo: Lesley McGwynne*

by Dave Morgan, Rachel Saunders, Kate Davies, Liz Warren, Margaret Brown, Andy Hackland and Roger Paul.

An innovation at the 2016 July Camp was a trial, one-day Navigation Course run by Trevor Scott Johnson. It was well received and will be expanded next year. Hallam Payne was there exploring to see if there were convenient rock routes nearby. He hopes to come back next year and lead a climbing party.

Since we had so many first-timers this year, it seemed appropriate to record what impresses them the most about July Camp. On arrival, it seems to be the fact that we have bathrooms with hot water, if not 'on tap', then certainly by the jug-full. As the first day progresses, so they enjoy the tasty meals that satisfy healthy Berg appetites and the fact that for dinner we serve a three course meal under solar lights! Next morning, they are wakened by the traditional call of "Coffee please" as they are served coffee at their tents, usually while still in their sleeping bags. As they set out on their first hike, so they become acquainted with a firm July Camp culinary tradition, Vusi's pickled pork.



An outstanding feature of this Camp was the exceptional hospitality we received from the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife staff. Sibongiseni Micca Khoza, the Acting Officer-in-Charge of Lotheni Nature Reserve, visited us almost every other day, just to make sure that we did not need anything and Bongiwe Duma, the Receptionist at Lotheni was a most gracious and caring hostess. We thoroughly enjoyed their visits and were able to reciprocate by inviting them to share several meals with us. Another pleasant surprise was a visit from Dumisane Mpontshane, the Officer-in Charge of Vergelegen, the July Camp venue of two years ago.

The last time we had been at Lotheni was some 20 years ago when we experienced 'The Big Snow'. This year, however, the weather was relatively mild, with most days being typical for July, cold in the mornings until the sun reached the Camp site (at about the end of breakfast), then warming up until it was quite warm to hot at mid-day and during the earlier part of the afternoon, and then suddenly dropping when the sun left the Camp site at afternoon tea time. The evenings were still and certainly cold enough to ensure that we needed campfires. We were lucky in our timing; the next weekend was extremely cold with rain and snow! It would have been quite beastly trying to strike camp in those conditions.

Every time I sit in the group of July Campers around the camp fire, I am immensely grateful to Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife for the unique privileges they accord to July Camp. Such is the relationship that we have built up with them over the years that we are allowed to have three fires at July Camp, the essential cooking fire (although we do take gas in case the weather prevents the wise use of a kitchen fire), the fire under the hot water 'donkey' down by the river which provides the hot water for our baths and the camp fire (weather permitting). This year we had wonderful camp fires and enjoyed their warmth that encouraged chatting and singing.

After such a successful Camp, surely every July Camper must have left Lotheni refreshed in body and spirit.