A CLOSER LOOK AT THE
PAINTED WOLF

by
Georgina Lockwood
Friday, 8 January 2016
My last memory of African wild dogs was on my 13th birthday. Midway through sundowners and chocolate cake while on safari in Madikwe Game Reserve, a stampede of wildebeest and impala crashed the party, with wild dogs hot on their tails. Abandoning the cake we followed suit!

Fast-forward over a decade and the adrenaline rush was still the same when, out on a morning game drive with Rhino River Lodge, we found the Zululand Rhino Reserve’s six wild dogs shortly after 3.30am – playing like puppies, their large ears pricked up and bushy tails wagging.
We were on the reserve’s perimeter and the dogs were busy demolishing an impala carcass. After losing them for a short while, we found them again at the dam with another impala kill. And just after we were told how rare it was to see two wild dog kills in a row, the dogs were in formation and hunting again – this time a nyala was the chosen target. I quickly gathered that nothing is guaranteed when it comes to the wild dog. Survival is the only rule of the game.

I was lucky enough to be on a game drive with Sam Vorster from WildlifeACT, which monitors and researches the dogs every day as part of an ongoing project that is run by David Marneweck from the Wild Dog Advisory Group (WAG). WAG is currently intensively managing South Africa’s metapopulation of 259 dogs, which are divided into 10 packs. The organisation also monitors the genetics of these wild dogs, and helps to bond and relocate breakaway groups.
into new reserves.

The particular wild dogs that we saw were originally from Madikwe Game Reserve and Zimanga Private Game Reserve, and they were released into Zululand Rhino Reserve in May 2015.

Back at Rhino River Lodge I chatted about the experience with Chris Kelly from WildlifeACT and the KwaZulu-Natal Wild Dog Advisory Group (KZNWAG). He shared his own stories of the wild dogs, as well as the trials and successes of their project, which led me to better understand the complex nature of these animals, and how saving them is not a simple task.

**Nature’s masterpiece**

The African wild dog is one of the most successful predators in the world – second only to ourselves. However, humans could still learn a thing or two from wild dogs.

Selflessness, teamwork, compassion, loyalty and intelligence are all endearing anthropomorphic qualities that could be assigned to the African wild dog. And it is these qualities that make them so successful as a species. From hunting, group dynamics, mating and pup rearing, wild dogs “scientifically make perfect sense,” according to David Marneweck.

There are stories of dogs that have survived on three, even two limbs, for several years thanks to the loyalty and generosity of pack dynamics. A dog that was monitored by the National Wild Dog Metapopulation Project, the KwaZulu-Natal Wild Dog Advisory Group (KZNWAG) and WildlifeACT even broke its jaw and lived for
years on food that was regurgitated by his pack mates.

Packs can be as small as two animals but, to be evolutionarily stable, there should be a minimum of six dogs and no more than 30 in a pack. In a healthy pack, there will tend to be two alpha dogs – one male and one female – followed by the rest of the pack of gamma dogs. Pack ranking is determined by submission rather than aggression, and the whole pack is dedicated to protecting the pups, as well as to hunting. Wild dogs have high energy levels and play almost continuously – even straight after eating – as a way of bonding.

“Seen isolated from his pack, a single African wild dog is not very impressive. Seen in a fast moving, well-coordinated group chasing a prey... (it) is one of the most touching experiences you can have on this planet.” – Thierry Aebischer, Chinko Project/African Parks
Born hunters

Like the hunter-gathers that dipped their arrows in the poisonous latex of the euphorbia tree found on Zululand Rhino Reserve, the wild dog is also a pursuit predator. This means that they will chase their prey to the point of exhaustion by holding a steady pace, as opposed to the cheetah’s use of short bursts of speed. Ever resourceful, they will also often chase prey into fences.

They kill by disemboweling their victims, which is why they get their reputation for being cruel killers. However, when executed properly, this process is significantly faster than the suffocation tactic of leopards and lions.

Lower ranking dogs tend to initiate the hunts and run the risk of injury, while the breeding pair is kept out of harm’s way. This protocol also means that the underdogs have the chance to guzzle down a couple of mouthfuls before the top dogs and the puppies arrive. Unlike lions, the little ones take priority at the kill.
Wild thing, you make my heart sing! ©Olli Teirila, Black Grouse

Photography
It’s a permanent puppy-love affair between the alpha dogs. They sleep next to each other, at times even piddling on each other, and they keep the pack bonded. Socially they’re monogamous, but reproductively they’re promiscuous for the sake of future generations.

The alpha female mates predominately with her beloved alpha male, but a succession of other males also step up to the plate. This not only helps the gene pool, but it also means that the other males in the pack are invested in raising puppies, as there is always the chance that one of the newborns is their own.
A dog can give birth to between 10 and 17 puppies, and their survival rate is proportional to the amount of adults in the pack, which will bring regurgitated food for the nursing mother and the pups.

Lower ranking females have also been known to give birth, although their pups have a lower survival rate.

There is a great story about a gamma female in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park that split from her pack, along with three 11-month-old dogs, and subsequently gave birth to eight puppies. She was killed by a lion at the den, which is a common threat to nursing mothers, and the newly formed young pack then went missing. However, the remaining members resurfaced years later with all eight of the former puppies still alive. The juvenile dogs had successfully raised the eight puppies and survived despite the odds.
Populations in Africa

The African wild dog used to occur across the continent, but today this candid canine is extinct in west and north Africa. The
conservation status of the dogs cannot be determined in several countries due to civil unrest, and, like most predators, they are difficult to count across large areas. However, the good news is that there are certain strongholds that are being monitored in various countries, such as Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The Selous-Niassa wildlife corridor in Mozambique also plays a pivotal role as the second largest wild dog population in the world today, and the species has somewhat thrived in South Africa due to the protection that a few private and small reserves provide.

Meanwhile Tanzania is home to 20% of the global population of African wild dogs, and an important discovery has also been the 40 to 100 wild dogs that have been located in the Chinko Nature Reserve in the Central African Republic.

The plight of the painted wolf
“You will not find a more social, fascinating and stunning species, nor one more emblematic of the plight of Africa’s large carnivores and large, wild landscapes.” – Matthew S. Becker, Zambian Carnivore Programme.

The African wild dog is running out of space and into trouble with neighbouring farmers. Their main problem is that there are now just too few conservation areas that are big enough to contain them, and their habitat has been severely fragmented.

When it comes to wild dogs, good fences make good neighbours. Wild dogs are safe under the protection of reserves but, as they run up to 25 kilometres a day, these boundary pushers tend to bump into fences more than any other predator, which creates more opportunities for them to escape if the fences are not up to scratch.

Escaped dogs are heavily persecuted by farmers. They were previously even known as the ‘Devil’s Dog’ by farmers because they can wreak havoc on livestock.
Pushing boundaries ©Georgina Lockwood

Formerly referred to as the ‘Devil’s Dog’ by farmers ©Georgina Lockwood
Even if they remain within the safety of the fences, they still run into trouble in the form of snares, which are one of the biggest issues for wild dogs across Africa. Impoverished communities on the periphery of reserves use snares to catch bushmeat to feed their families. However, snares are non-selective and have catastrophic effects on wild dogs, which the locals don’t necessarily intend to eat. The wild dogs’ ‘all for one and one for all’ attitude means that the rest of the pack returns to its ensnared member only to get entangled in the web of snares themselves. There have sadly been cases where entire packs have been killed by snares.

Poachers have also been known to use domestic dogs to hunt illegally
in reserves. These often carry rabies and canine distemper, which threaten wild dog populations. Mongooses are also natural carriers of rabies.

Wild dogs ideally require large territories of at least 22,000ha, as well as a sufficient amount of prey species to satisfy their requirements. Even in sufficiently-sized reserves, wild dogs are often not wanted because of their hunting prowess and the resultant impact on high value game species such as tsetsebe and nyala.

The name ‘wild dog’ is hardly complimentary for such an interesting animal and there has been a movement to ‘re-brand’ the species using its Latin name – *Lycaon pictus* – translating to ‘painted wolf’. This name not only describes the dog’s ‘artistic’ coat, but it is said to naturally peak interest in the canine.

Fortunately for the African wild dog, its body parts are not required for traditional medicine anywhere in the world. However, wild stock is still captured to replenish zoo populations across the globe, and these athletic dogs have been found in appalling captive conditions, as illustrated in the documentary, *Zoo Business*. 
As is so often the case, humans are part of the solution as well as the problem. And the African wild dog is now dependent on rural
Job creation and education is a long-term solution

Unfortunately, while poverty still exists on the periphery of national parks, snares will remain an issue because people need to eat. Turning poachers into protectors through job creation and education is, therefore, a long-term solution to this problem. Initiating vaccination campaigns for domestic dogs in these rural areas is also of utmost importance.

The formation of wildlife corridors and the dropping of fences between protected areas is vital for the dogs to be able to migrate properly and form new packs without the risk of inbreeding or requiring intensive management. Also, good fences and proper management on boundaries with community areas are key to successful conservation.

There are multiple organisations throughout Africa, such as the Painted Dog Research Trust and the Environmental Wildlife Trust, that are working tirelessly to protect these inspiring animals. You can donate, adopt, volunteer or even sponsor research equipment through most of these organisations.

It is arguably also a case of supply and demand. If you ask to see an African wild dog on your next safari, you will not be disappointed. You’ll also be playing a vital role in encouraging reserves to see them as a valuable asset, rather than a costly nuisance.
Where to see the African wild dog

At Rhino River Lodge you can expect a luxury experience on a 23,000 hectare Big Five game reserve. Situated in the heart of South Africa’s Zululand, a maximum of 18 guests can stay along the shore of the Msunduze River in the southern section of the Zululand Rhino Reserve. The area is not only renowned for its African wildlife and rich cultural heritage, but it is also home to a small pack of wild dogs that, if found, will have you on the edge of your seat!
Immerse yourself in the African wilderness and explore the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, where there is the chance to see one of the 297 wild dogs that roam the Greater Kruger National Park. A stay at either the East African-inspired tented safari camp or the exclusive field camp at Tanda Tula will offer the chance to honour nature on foot or track wildlife on a game drive, before returning to soak up the down-to-earth atmosphere of either camp.

According to the Zambia Carnivore Programme, there are indications that eastern Zambia may have one of the more significant remaining wild dog populations on the continent, and the predator-rich Luangwa Valley is a great place to try your luck at spotting one. Robin Pope Safaris specialises in mobile wilderness walking safaris in South Luangwa National Park, which allow you to spend your days exploring the South Luangwa on foot while keeping your eyes peeled for man’s wild best friend.

It is also estimated that up to 350 wild dogs live in southern Botswana, and the best place to set eyes on some of these canines is in Moremi Game Reserve. Contact Africa Geographic Travel if this is on your bucket list and we will create a bespoke safari to make your wildest wild dog dreams come true.
Unwind in the lap of luxury at Rhino River Lodge ©Paul Changuion

Spotting a wild dog on a game drive with Rhino River Lodge ©Stuart Parker, Zululand Rhino Reserve

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Georgie grew up escaping Johannesburg city to go horseback riding in the Magaliesberg mountains or Land Rover-ing in the Madikwe sandveld. Accustomed to the sun on her face and the wind in her hair, Georgina embarked as a trainee sailor on a three-masted barque to travel the world beyond her beloved Southern Africa. Ship life steered her to remote destinations and ecological treasure houses like the Galapagos, Pitcairn Island and Polynesia. Once grounded, her love of the outdoors developed into a deep respect for the environment and a desire to preserve it. Georgina graduated from the University of Cape Town with a degree in Environmental Science.
From a closer look at tribal culture in Namibia and Ethiopia, to beautiful landscape photography in Lesotho and Kenya, this week's selection of photos from the Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016 competition will have you applying the sunscreen in preparation for your next adventure. Just click on the 'Next' button above each image to help you decide where you'd like to head to next.

Brought to you by Canon and Cape Union Mart, just click here for more details and to enter the competition if you're sitting on a photo that you feel captures the essence of Africa.
Week 6: Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016

Each morning the Himba women in Otjimazeva Village, Namibia, undertake a lengthy beauty regime, whereby they crush small ochre stones into a fine powder before adding it to a butterfat mixture to apply to their bodies ©Ben McRae
Keipepe holds her favourite goat in Otjimazeva Village, Namibia, after she has checked that all of the goats have made it through the night ©Ben McRae
Week 6: Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016

Whispering at the moon ©Javier Villegas
The beauty of Kenya ©Savan Malde
A small family of elephants enjoys a mud bath in a dwindling waterhole in Kruger National Park, South Africa ©Bert Fourie
Week 6: Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016

A flock of Cape gannets in Lambert's Bay, South Africa ©Derek Dunlop
Week 6: Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016

Picture 9 of 12

A beautiful view over Prince Albert, South Africa ©John Vosloo
After motioning to the camera, a Daasenich woman in the Omo Valley, Ethiopia, wants to see what her new beads look like around her neck ©Ben McRae
Week 6: Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year 2016

Sunrise at the Sani Pass in Lesotho ©Jasmin Nagel
A female lioness backlit by the late afternoon sun in Etosha National Park ©Anja Denker