



African Wildlife Conservation Fund

Spotlight on AWCF's Lowveld Wild Dog Project, Zimbabwe

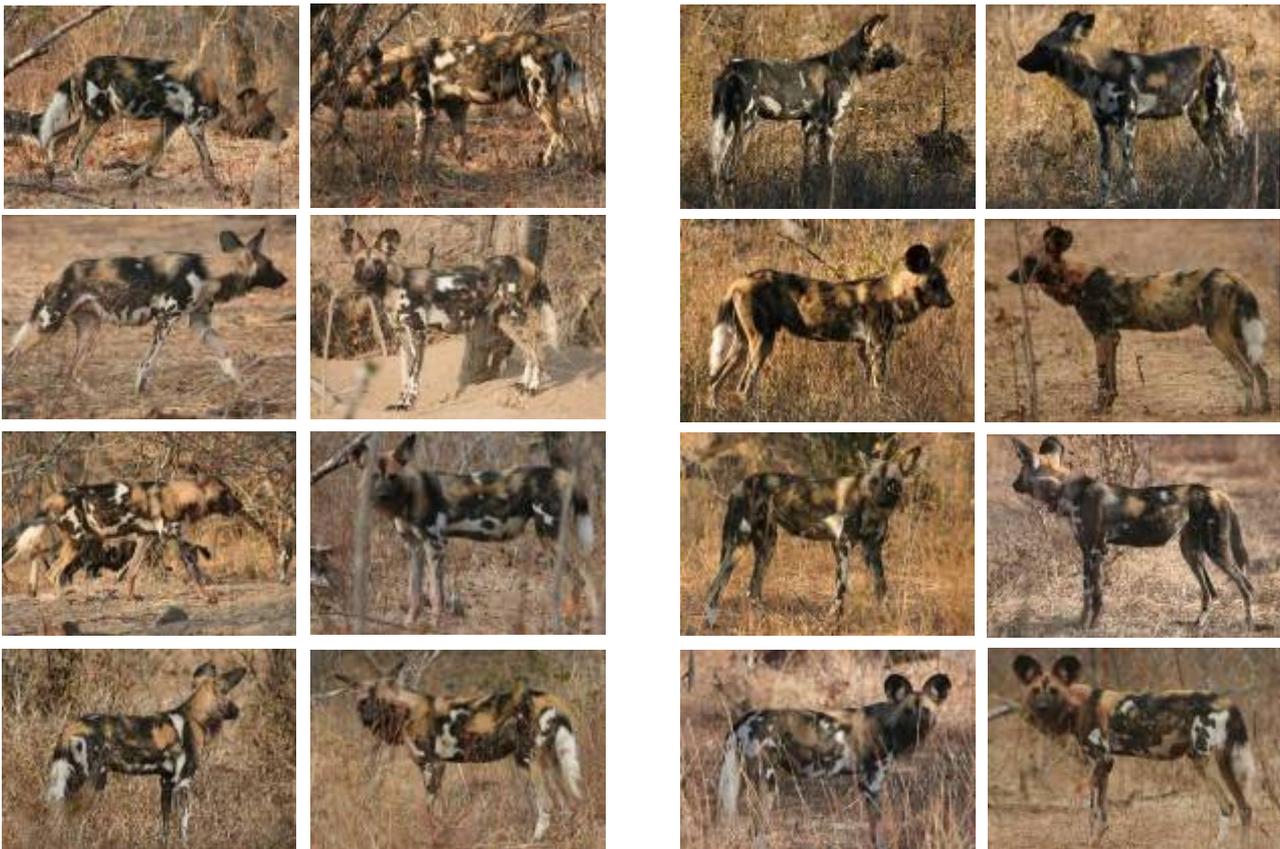
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END OF DENNING SEASON REPORT - SEPTEMBER 2008

The wild dog project in the Savé Valley Conservancy has had a busy few months. June through September are peak denning months for the wild dogs when they have their litters. More to the point: the dogs stay in the same place for a couple of months, so we are able to find them!

Work has been largely two fold this denning season: the scouts have been busy looking for fresh tracks and following them to try and locate the dens (no easy task!). We then spent a lot of time at the dens trying to establish the population dynamics of each pack – i.e. numbers of adults, numbers of pups, age of pups, which pups belong to which mother, etc. We've also been taking photographs to build up an identification database for each of the dogs. Here's an example showing eight of the twelve dogs of the Bedford pack (and by the way - matching the left hand side with the right hand side of each dog is not as easy as it may sound!!). We've done this now for 36 dogs in 5 different packs...

The Bedford Pack (8 of the 12 adults)



We have found 4 dens this denning season. Adults in two of the packs don't match photographic records we have from previous years. We've named these unknown packs according to place names where we found their dens: the Nyarushanga Pack and the Mapari Pack. One other pack (the Maera pack) is a well known pack and the other one (now called the Bedford pack) appears to be a combination of dogs from two different 2007 packs. We've put a brief summary of each of the packs below. What is most interesting this year is that there seem to be quite a few subordinate females breeding (usually only the alpha pair breeds).

The Bedford Pack

The Bedford Pack has 12 adults (7 males and 5 females). The alpha female had 14 pups in May and all are still alive and well. They are wonderfully charismatic little fellows, and very curious about the car which makes for some incredible sightings...

The three musketeers!



A big pile of pups



Another female (known as Pincer) in this pack has also had 6 pups. Hers are about 2 months younger than the alpha female's, and she is still suckling them. The 14 older pups are eating meat now – usually regurgitated to them at the den by the adults, but sometimes they are taken out on a hunt. It's wonderful to watch the interaction between the big pups and the little pups.

Pincer with 5 of her 6 small pups



The big pups playing with the little pups!!



AND... there is a third lactating female in this pack too! She's known as Missy because she has a white mark in the shape of an 'M' on her front left thigh. We haven't seen her pups yet, but she is heavily lactating and has been seen going in and out of the den on several occasions. We'll let you know about her litter in the next report.

So, when all these pups grow up there will be more than 32 dogs just in this pack! Chances are very high that the pack will split, and the photographic records will come in very useful here so we can see which dogs go where and what happens to them all over time.

The Nyarushanga Pack

This is a new pack of only 4 adult dogs. We thought there were only 3 adults for a long time, because at every sighting there were only the same three adults, but then we put a camera trap at the den for a week and caught a fourth dog on film. Amazing! They are raising 6 pups, which are

probably just under 3 months old now. It's pretty good going for such a small pack – it is rare that packs of adults smaller than 5 manage to successfully rear litters.

They are very shy dogs in this pack, and we unfortunately haven't been able to get very close to them. They have denned in a beautiful rocky area though, so at least that's some compensation for all those hours sitting at the den seeing nothing (because the dogs are sleeping on the top of the rocky hillside with no intention of being seen!!).

We have at least managed to get decent identification photographs of all the adults though, and have captured the pups on the camera trap photos too.



The Maera Pack



The Maera pack is another big pack. There are also 12 adults in this pack (also 7 males and 5 females), and two different litters of pups as well. The alpha female (Harriet) had 4 pups, but recently we've only been seeing 3... We did catch a spotted hyena at the den on a camera trap, so it's possible that the fourth pup was eaten by the hyena. Another female in the pack (Cindy) appears to be the mother of a couple of much smaller pups at the same den.

Overall therefore there are 5 pups at this den: 3 big ones and 2 small ones. But there was (again!) a third lactating female in the pack last month, although we haven't seen her for a while and are not sure if she has pups.

The Mapari Pack

We only found this den a couple of weeks ago: Misheck (one of our scouts) found it by following tracks he found on a road until it led him to the den. There are at least 4 adult dogs there. We haven't yet spent enough time with them to be sure that is all the adults though. They had at least 6 pups of about 2 months old, but sadly one of the pups was found dead a few days ago, so they are down to 5 now. We suspect it was a natural death – perhaps a snake bite – but we are keeping a close eye on the pack nonetheless in case there is an outbreak of disease.

The adults in this pack have interesting features – one has lots of beautiful white markings, one is very dark with almost no white and one is very sandy colored:



Radio Collaring

Before talking about the dogs we have collared, we'd like to briefly discuss a point recently raised by someone on our Wildlife Direct blog (www.wildlifedirect.org/blogAdmin/Zimbabwewilddogs): why do we need radio collars and how do they help conservation? Sometimes researchers collar wild animals just because it seems to be 'the thing to do', or simply to gather data for a scientific article they want to write, both of which can be controversial.



Our project is 100% a conservation project, and whilst we will collect data and write articles, this is a secondary objective to the conservation of the species. So – why are we putting radio collars on? Well - firstly because any realistic conservation measures need a basic background information such as numbers of individuals, distribution of packs, litter sizes, pup survival, causes of adult mortality, etc. All such information requires observations of the dogs and, quite simply, wild dogs can be virtually impossible to find without collars! The VHF collars we use transmit a signal that we can hear using an antenna. We then follow the signal to check on the dogs in remote areas. Wild dogs can have home ranges of up to 2000km² (494,210 acres), which is a HUGE area of wilderness in which to look for the dogs, especially given the vast distances they can move on a daily basis, which can be up to 50 km (31 miles). Although the home ranges in the Savé Valley Conservancy are quite a bit smaller (400-1000km²; 100,000–250,000 acres) the area is still far too big to be able to locate the dogs regularly without collars.

As well as collecting the data outlined above, frequent observations of all packs are important to pick up any early signs of disease (e.g. rabies, canine distemper) so that measures can be taken to prevent or control the disease. Collars also help to locate carcasses of dogs so we can investigate causes of death and uncover future potential threats to the dogs. We also use GPS collars that use satellites to give us wild dog position locations. These GPS collars provide extra information on habitat usage, daily movement patterns, hunting times and patterns, etc., all of which helps us understand the dogs ecological requirements so that we can better conserve them.



All collared dogs in this project are followed up regularly. We do not collar dogs unless we have the time, equipment, and personnel to locate and observe them frequently. Importantly, there have been studies done which show there is no long term adverse effect on the animal from being collared. In fact, in our study, one of the collared males became the alpha male of the pack after being collared, which at the very least shows that his fitness, strength and 'attractiveness' were not negatively affected by the collar.

The collared dogs

We now have 7 wild dogs collared in 4 different packs:

Mavericks pack: 1 male with a VHF collar

Maera pack: 1 male with a VHF collar (the alpha male) and 1 male with a GPS collar

Mapari pack: 1 female with a GPS collar

Bedford pack: 1 female with a VHF collar, 1 female with a GPS collar & 1 male with a GPS collar



We put 3 collars on the Bedford pack because it is very likely that the pack will split after they finish denning this year (it's much easier to get the collars on when they are denning and we can reliably find them). The 2 collared females should stick together because they were litter mates from last year and young females often leave the pack together. This is good news: we aim to pair GPS and VHF collars because the GPS collars which store the positional information for us have a very weak signal strength for tracking so it's best to pair them with a VHF collar that has a much greater range when tracking. Hopefully, when the pack splits, the other collared male will end up in a separate group from the young females, so we don't double up GPS collars for long.



For regular project updates, check out the wild dog project blog (www.wildlifedirect.org/blogAdmin/Zimbabwewilddogs), and feel free to email us any time to find out what is happening in the field (rosemary@africanwildlifeconservationfund.org). For further information on the wild dogs and on other AWCF projects, have a look at the AWCF website: (www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/)

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