



Update – end October 2009

Normally when I set out in search of the wild dogs, I have a fair bit of equipment with me; things like the telemetry set, GPS, camera, binoculars, notebook and so on. For a 7 week period, from mid-September until last week, there was another very important item, without which I would not be able to get to the dogs: my PASSPORT...



After denning on the Limpopo River for the second year, the pack left the den with all 13 of their three-month old pups, and crossed into South Africa. They headed straight for the sandstone hills that are characteristic of this area. In comparison, there are very few hills to the north of the

Limpopo River, and these topographical features are ideal for hiding young, vulnerable pups while the pack goes out hunting. The GPS collar data often reflected these movements, with the dogs returning to the same spot that they had set out from earlier on. Last year the dogs moved north after denning, and tried to use a very small outcrop in the centre of the reserve as a refuge for the pups. They had the youngsters there for a few days but it was obviously not to their satisfaction, as they returned to the den. The pups are very vulnerable during this period, so it is not surprising that they have their offspring's best interests at heart, especially after all the hard work that goes into raising a large litter.

Unlike the Northern Tuli Game Reserve, land use varies greatly in the adjacent parts of SA. This can create problems for the conservation of wide-ranging species, especially predators, as farmers frequently resent them. After a period of time, this risk became all too evident with the wild dogs, and the sandstone hills they sought for safety suddenly brought about a very serious threat that went undetected by the dogs. Initially they spent a good deal of time on Vhembe Game Reserve where they were perfectly safe. After a while they gradually moved in a westerly direction and moved onto a couple of other farms. Some of these properties have relatively small fenced-off areas with wildlife. Hunting is conducted on the properties so each impala, wildebeest, or kudu that is lost to the dogs represents a financial loss to the owner. Game is often bought and put on the properties and this is a costly operation. As a result, these farmers' unwillingness to accommodate the wild dogs is understandable.

Prior to the pack's escapades into SA, there was essentially no communication between the NTGR and the neighbouring farmers situated along the Limpopo River. Despite the trouble they may have caused, the wild dogs have acted as catalysts, bringing the two parties together. Knowing only your neighbour's name and hearing bits and pieces about their characters via the

Background to NTGR Wild Dog Project

A pack of 18 wild dogs was reintroduced to the Northern Tuli Game Reserve in November 2007. Initially held in an enclosure, the pack was released on 5 April 2008. The project aims to establish a viable pack of this endangered species within the Limpopo Valley region of eastern Botswana. A research programme has been established in addition to a community outreach initiative, educating local communities about wild dogs, predators and conservation in general.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The image displays a row of logos for the project's partners. From left to right: BioBoundary Project (a cow silhouette), Endangered Wildlife Trust (a red paw print), Department of Wildlife & National Parks Botswana (a circular logo with a wild dog), Mammal Research Institute (a tree and animals), University of Pretoria (a crest with '100 1908-2008'), Mashatu Botswana (a silhouette of an elephant and a dog), and Tuli Safari Lodge Botswana (the word 'Tuli' in script above a silhouette of animals).



bush telegraph is not a healthy situation. Based on dubious stories, one tends to generate preconceived ideas about people. Meeting them face-to-face and getting to know them personally gives you a far more accurate impression of people's characters, what is important to them, and how we can work together as neighbours. We realised this after meeting one or two farmers, and set out to meet as many of the landowners as possible. This certainly paid off, as the dogs moved onto the same farm as where one of our male lions was shot four months ago. This time they did not shoot, they had a telephone number and they called. This was not a happy neighbour on the other end of the phone, but we could address the problem and smooth things out thereafter. Most importantly there is now communication.

The conservation potential of the region is huge yet there are certain landuses that are somewhat incompatible and bound to invite conflict. The farms of concern are located in a relatively narrow strip along the Limpopo, and are almost entirely surrounded by conservation-orientated properties. The combined geographic footprint of these farms is small, yet dozens of lions, leopards, hyenas, elephants etc, etc have been shot here over the years. For their small size, these farms have a disproportionately large effect on conservation efforts in the region. However, their small size also creates opportunities, such as ring-fencing them in an attempt to greatly reduce the risk of conflict.

Pete le Roux (General Manager: Mashatu) is driving this initiative and to date there has been a very positive response from the farmers. This project would be mutually beneficial: The farmers will have far less hassles from conflict species (not only predators, but crop raiders such as elephants), and from the wildlife conservation point of view, we would be loose far less animals in years to come. There is a saying that good fences make good neighbours, and that may well be the case here. There is a very good international border fence to the north of the farms in question, and much of their southern boundaries are already fenced. These southern boundary fences are not electrified, so do not present much of a barrier to predators or elephants. The proposed idea, which is quickly gaining momentum, is to electrify the southern fences. This will cost approximately ZAR25 000 per kilometre, with approximately 10km that would need to be electrified (Total for electrification ± ZAR 250 000). There are also small sections where the fence will either need to be improved or be erected, so there will be some additional costs for that. We have had some generous offers from certain individuals to date, and we would like to make a request for further donations, no matter how big or small. This project would be of great benefit to so many species - not only for threatened wild dogs and lions - and we trust that you also see the merit of the idea and will assist with this endeavour. Should you be willing to contribute to this cause, please contact Pete le Roux directly at <petelr.mnr@telkomsa.net> and he will provide you with the necessary details.



Happenings within the pack

Upon their return the pack numbered 18: ten pups and eight adults. Just prior to their return, six of the younger males split off from the pack in search of some females of their own. This is a normal occurrence, and dispersing units are typically single-sex groups. They leave their natal pack in search of members of the opposite sex, and thereby form a new pack with unrelated individuals. This may well happen with our females as well, but if things go according to plan, we have other plans for them... More on this on the blog in the next two weeks...

Email list

Should you have received this update “via the grapevine” and would like me to email it to you directly in future, please send me an email (crjackson@zoology.up.ac.za) and I will add you to the mailing list.

Until next time,
All the best

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Craig Jackson", written in a cursive style.

Craig Jackson