

April - 2008

THE NORTHERN TULI WILD DOG PROJECT*Craig Jackson*

A lot has happened since the last update a few weeks back. The dogs are, in general, doing pretty well despite several challenges. Previously I mentioned how the dogs were battling to hunt efficiently. Fortunately this has changed for the better and they are now killing far more frequently than during the first two weeks. The biggest concern was the pack's lack of fitness after spending almost eleven months in enclosures. Furthermore, half the pack is composed of yearlings that had absolutely no hunting experience, and quite a few two-year-olds that would have had limited hunting time before they were captured. This lack of experience was evident in their

earlier uncoordinated hunting attempts when it often appeared as though it was each dog for him or herself. The dogs are still killing younger animals most of the time (impala, warthog, kudu) but they are doing so pretty readily. They have also taken a couple of larger impala and at least one adult warthog.

**Movements and Snares**

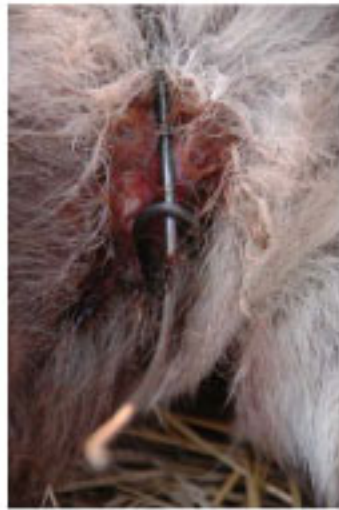
The dogs previously spent most of their time along the Limpopo River and hardly moved more than a kilometre or two north thereof, and never moved more than about two kilometres east of their release site. We then noticed that Dutch, the alpha female, started leading the pack in their movements and headed pretty determinedly in a south westerly direction, along the river. There was some debate as to whether she could be heading back towards their former home and den at Marakele National Park. They moved west of the veterinary fence into a hilly area south west of the Lentswe Le Moriti village. It was very difficult to pick up a signal from the collars and there are no roads in this area. We did not see the dogs for about two days and we only saw them again (on foot) when they moved out in an easterly direction. Rex and I found 15 snares here and there was a dog missing. It was Dutch. Another dog came out of this area with a snare around its neck. The pack was calling for three days in an attempt to find their missing pack member. Unfortunately it seems she most likely must have succumbed to a snare.

The eastern part of the Northern Tuli Game Reserve has a major problem with snaring, specifically from Zimbabweans coming across the Shashe River. A dedicated anti-poaching team patrols this area. Poaching in the remainder of the reserve was not thought to be a major problem. Following this incident the Reserve's fence-line team was deployed on a couple of anti-poaching patrols and pulled out massive amounts of snares in several different places. One of the major hotspots is along the "back-line" fence. Poachers enter illegally, set their snares, then return later to see what they have caught. One of these poachers was arrested last week. Yesterday I joined the guys and we pulled out 54 snares in less than five hours. This brings the total to close on 200. Our patrol was concentrated around the dogs' current position, and we even encountered them during the patrol. One particularly thick cable had claimed the life of a lion several months earlier. So, while this represents a major threat to the reserve's wildlife, at least we are now aware of the problem and I know it is being dealt with very seriously.

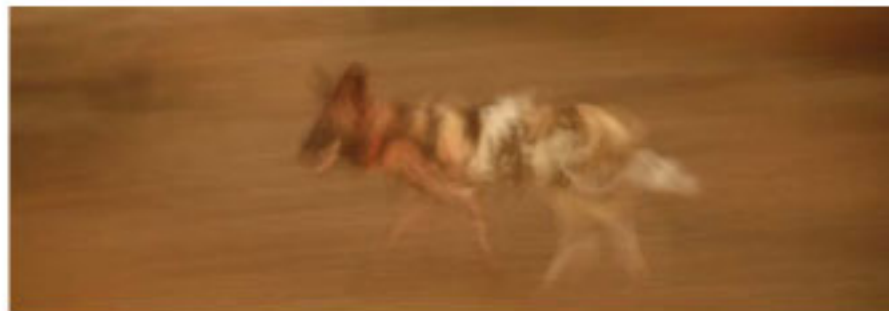
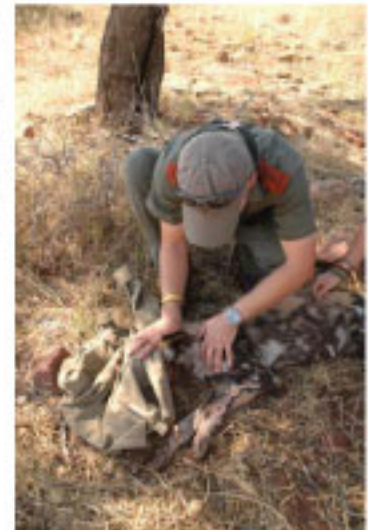




Mashatu Research Botswana



The dog carrying the snare was fortunate in that he managed to break the wire, and in doing so, free himself. We located the dog, immobilised it, removed the snare, treated the wound and released him. I am happy to report that he has recovered 100%. Thanks to Tuli Safari Lodge for granting us permission to drive off-road to successfully complete this exercise.



Following the loss of Dutch, the pack moved all the way back to the Pontdrift area almost overnight. They spent a couple of days around here, and then gradually moved in a north-westerly direction, back through the veterinary fence. They stayed close to the fence and it appeared as though they wanted to move back through it. From a management point of view, there are far less risks associated with the central region of the reserve, as opposed to the pack hovering around the western boundary (people, goats, snares etc). For this reason, we attempted to "motivate" them to move back through the fence by sacrificing an impala and dragging it about 1km, with the dogs in hot pursuit, to the veterinary fence and then placing it on the opposite side. This "mini-reintroduction" happened to be exactly one month after the dogs were released, and we had not supplemented their feeding at all. The exercise went pretty smoothly although two dogs were very reluctant to move through the fence (which we had manipulated to ease their movement). Interestingly, the one dog was the young male that had been snared, and the other was Kalahari, an extremely timid individual. Eventually, just before sunset, they also moved through and we were quite chuffed with our efforts. The next morning, however, they were back on the western side of the fence...



Since then they have basically remained in this area. There is a natural spring that attracts game and the dogs are not moving too far from this area. Rex and I saw them successfully hunt a young kudu and impala here. Unfortunately this area has hardly any roads, which means that in the dense scrub Mopane it is almost impossible to following the dogs when they are active. I have clocked up close on 2000km on these dusty roads in the last 30 days, trying to be with the dogs early every morning and then again late in the afternoon. Given their current position (far from camp) and the difficulty associated with following them, I will now instead find them during the middle of the day and see where they are resting. This will both give me a little more time in camp to work with the data we have been collecting and save a lot on fuel.



Other wild dog sightings

A day after release three young males (two-year-olds) dispersed from the pack. This was not unexpected, as these dogs have now moved off in search of "their own" females. Previously I reported how they had moved around in close proximity to the Bioboundary or Biofence (a series of faecal and urine markings, collected from another pack, and placed around the perimeter of the reserve in an attempt to simulate occupied territories, with the view that this may restrict their movements). Additional sightings on the reserve further support this observed movement pattern, with a few sightings closer to the Tuli Circle. The lone male (presumably a male) seen in the east of the reserve was seen again in the north west, near Nitani Lodge, once again close to the biofence. The three males were also seen here a few weeks previously. It appears as though these males, in search of females, are using the chemical cues as a guide. We are hoping to get an additional GPS collar so that we can track these males' precise movements in relation to the Biofence.

New Alpha female

Prior to the loss of the alpha female, Namib, the alpha male, started mating with Cairo. While this was a little unusual and did not necessarily mean she would be the new alpha female, she has assumed this role after the loss of Dutch. Dutch would have probably given birth in the last week of May, but Cairo, should she successfully conceive, will probably only give birth closer to the end of June. This is quite an important event, as it will result in the pack staying close to the den for about three months. The choice of den sight could therefore have quite a major bearing on the success of the project. Lets hope for the best! While it appeared that Dutch was quite set on leading the pack south-west, they have not been moving in this direction since her disappearance and perhaps, in a cruel way, her loss may actually be a blessing in disguise?

Map

Below is a map indicating some of the areas the main pack has visited since their release (red dots).

