



African Wildlife Conservation Fund

Spotlight on AWCF's Lowveld Wild Dog Project, Zimbabwe

APRIL 2009

The Lowveld Wild Dog Project (LWDP) has been running smoothly for the last few months. The wild dogs move widely during the wet season due to the abundance of prey and the widespread availability of water, making them more difficult to find. Nonetheless we have been able to keep a close track on all our collared packs and have even managed to find and collar a new pack!



Collared Wild Dog Packs

We currently have 5 packs collared and have built up a good photographic identification database of all the dogs in these packs in the Savé Valley Conservancy (SVC). The numbers have decreased since the packs were at their maximum at the end of last denning season, but pup survival has generally been very good.

Bedford Pack: The largest pack in SVC now consists of 29 dogs after 1 pup disappeared and 2 dogs (1 adult and 1 pup) were found dead in snares. These dogs use a large home range of over 41,000 hectares (410km²), so are not always easy to find!



Mavericks Pack: The Mavericks pack is the only wild dog pack in the southern half of SVC. The Mavericks did not den in 2008, probably because the alpha female was closely related to both the males in her pack so they did not mate. However, in January, a new female moved in to join the males, so we are hoping they will breed this year. The two other females in the original Mavericks pack are no longer with the collared male, but we hope that they have dispersed to find non-related males with which to breed in 2009.

The Mavericks pack represents a success story for our conservation efforts and highlights the resilience of these dogs. Sightings in August and September showed 3 of the 4 dogs were badly injured. The collared male was limping extremely badly on his front left leg, the young female had a snare around her neck, and the other male had a snare around his waist. We managed to remove the snare from the male's waist and, remarkably, he appears to be doing extremely well now:

The injury



Post snare removal



The dog today



When last seen the 'neck-snared female' as she became known appeared to have lost the snare and was looking fit and healthy. The collared male has stopped limping. We hope that with the arrival of the new female into the pack that they will breed this year, and perhaps we will even have 2 dens if the other 2 females have found some males!

Maera Pack: The Maera Pack didn't do too well rearing their pups last year and only two have survived. Unfortunately one of these has a snare round his neck which we haven't yet managed to remove despite best efforts. We will keep trying! One of the adults also disappeared recently – we are hoping he will show up somewhere soon, but it's most likely he has also been lost to a snare. Maera pack now totals 12 dogs.



Mapari Pack:



The Mapari pack is now 14 individuals: 6 adults and 8 pups. Unfortunately our only collared individual in this pack was killed in a snare in October (we found the collar in a hut in a village outside the conservancy), but we managed to collar another individual in December. This pack lives in a high-risk area and several members have been lost to snares over the past six months.

Teddy Pack: This pack (named by the young son of a landowner in the conservancy) was collared earlier this month (April 2009). They are a very charismatic pack consisting of 4 adults and 4 pups. It's not clear where they came from, although one of the adult males was photographed in April 2008 in the south of the conservancy.



Un-collared Wild Dog Packs

Unfortunately, given their enormous home ranges and incredible camouflage, wild dogs are notoriously difficult to find without being able to radio track them. Nonetheless, through a compilation of sightings reports from conservancy staff and managers and the occasional opportunistic sighting of un-collared packs, we have a reasonably good idea about the status of the dogs in the rest of the conservancy. There are 4 un-collared packs; Nyarushanga pack (about 12 dogs), Star pack (3 adults, 3 pups), Impala pack (2 adults, 6 pups) and Savuli pack (3 dogs).

Mortality

By far the highest cause of mortality for wild dogs in the Savé Valley Conservancy is snaring. Six out of the seven carcasses we have found recently have been confirmed snare cases and several dogs which have disappeared have most likely been killed by snares. Rabies poses a considerable threat to the wild dogs, especially in the south of the conservancy, due to the high levels of contact with domestic dogs, but we have had no confirmed cases of rabies in the last year.

Wild dogs have declined in the conservancy since 2004 and one possible cause is the increase in both lions and spotted hyenas in the conservancy. A carnivore spoor (tracks) survey and collection of managers estimates regarding carnivore numbers indicates a considerable increase in both the lion and hyena populations in recent years. Although mortality due to lions and hyenas is hard to document, it is a well established fact that lions are the highest cause of natural mortality for wild dogs, both directly through killing both adults and pups, and indirectly through stealing kills and competing for prey. Whilst hyenas would rarely kill an adult wild dog, they do kill pups at the dens and a large enough group will easily steal a wild dog kill. Like lions they also compete with wild dogs for prey.

Nonetheless, the snaring is most likely to be the biggest contributing factor to the wild dog decline in recent years. For example, two out of our seven collared wild dogs were killed in snares in the space of a couple of months. Human persecution and habitat fragmentation also pose a significant threat to wild dogs, although this is mainly an issue outside of SVC.

Future Plans

The LWDP will be continuing to work in SVC this year, as we have been for the past 12 years. However, we will also be expanding our work to the rest of the Zimbabwean part of the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area (GLTFCA). In 2009 we will begin working in nearby Gonarezhou National Park to assess the abundance, distribution and conservation status of the wild dogs there, and we are already collaborating with neighboring Malilangwe Reserve to keep a track of the wild dog packs there (they have one pack of 2 adults and 8 pups). Later in the year we hope to investigate the status of the wild dog populations in the other conservancies within the GLTFCA and examine the extent to which the populations are connected. We will use the wild dogs as a flagship species to promote conservation of the ecosystem as a whole.

Small Ways You Can Help Today

We will also be expanding our environmental education program this year; we are currently planning a local school field trip to the conservancy for 5 days where the children will learn about the bush, wildlife and conservation in general. We hope to host such trips regularly for schools surrounding the conservancy. We need to raise \$1,000 to cover the expenses of bringing the first group of children for this weekend field trip.

We remain committed to helping de-snare wild dogs, as well as other wildlife species that fall victim to snaring. To dart herbivores such as giraffe and buffalo to remove snares, the immobilization drugs we need are different from those for carnivores, and, unfortunately, are extortionately expensive. We need to raise an initial \$1,500 to keep the necessary drugs in stock so that we can be prepared to help to free snared animals or treat injured ones. This would allow us to do a huge amount to help the wildlife here.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the land owners and managers in SVC who allow us onto their property to look for wild dogs and especially to Chishakwe for allowing us to live there and helping us in so many other ways. Our scouts, Rueben and Misheck, work tirelessly to find the often elusive wild dogs and deserve a lot of credit.

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For more information, see: www.AfricanWildlifeConservationFund.org and the link to our blog on this site for regular project updates. Donations can be made through our website, or you can contact us directly on rosemary@africanwildlifeconservationfund.org.



Thank You!