



African Wildlife Conservation Fund

## Spotlight on AWCF's Lowveld Wild Dog Project, Zimbabwe

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### Introduction

Despite the political uncertainty at the moment in Zimbabwe, the wild dog project has never looked better! As of early 2008, we had raised sufficient funds to buy a new vehicle for the project as well as a motorbike for our scouts.



We also have a new full-time post-doctoral researcher working on the wild dogs. Rosemary Groom (PhD from Bristol University, UK), who joined us in March, grew up in Zimbabwe and since graduating with a first class degree in zoology has been working on conservation and research projects in Botswana and Kenya. She is thrilled to be back in Zimbabwe and is enjoying the challenge of running the wild dog project.

Our two Shona trackers, Rueben and Misheck are still working for us and their experience and knowledge of the wild dogs is, as always, an enormous asset to the project.



Rueben



Misheck

## The Wild Dogs

After an enormous fundraising effort by all the team, we have managed to secure sufficient funds to purchase nine new radio collars to put onto the wild dogs this forthcoming denning season (June to August 2008). Five of these are standard VHF radio collars, which allow us to track the wild dogs and get information on home range sizes, adult mortality, pup survival, movements between packs, diet selection and other important ecological data. The other four collars have the same function, but are also data-loggers, i.e., they store the GPS positions of the wild dogs at set intervals throughout the day. These will provide detailed information on daily movement patterns, use of certain habitats, the degree of contact with domestic dogs and the exact home ranges.



Wild dog spoor

Peter recently renewed his training and license to do the required immobilisation to fit the collars on the dogs. Peter and Rosemary hope to get at least one collar onto each of the majority of the packs in the Savé Valley Conservancy (~9 packs) before the end of the denning season this year.

The challenge at the moment however is far simpler; simply to locate the dogs! Usually at the beginning of each denning season, the wild dogs stop moving around so extensively and start looking for suitable denning sites, usually in densely vegetated areas. This not only means that they stay in thicker cover but because they move so much less, they leave far fewer nice convenient tracks on the roads for us to find! However, once we find them now, chances are good that they will den in that area and thus will be easier to find in future.

Once we have found them, we need to start habituating them to the vehicle so that we can get close enough to dart. That's the tough part of the job... sitting for hours on end watching the dogs play at the den – a hard life!



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Excitingly, last week we located our first den for this year. We believe it to be for a pack we call the Jacana pack, but we need to get individual identifications of some of the dogs to confirm this. When we visited the den, there was not yet any sign of the pups – they are still too young to be out – but it will be wonderful to see them when they eventually emerge.

### *Other work*

We are still working on a project assessing the impact of bushmeat snaring on the wildlife populations. Snaring remains a major threat to wildlife in the Savé Valley Conservancy (including wild dogs which get caught by accident) and there is concern that the level of off-take by snaring, in combination with hunting off-takes and natural off-takes from predation, means that wildlife is declining at an unsustainable rate. Peter and his team are focussing on this aspect of the work and looking into possible solutions to the problem, including the provision of a legal supply of bushmeat, which would provide the communities with their protein requirements in a far more efficient way than snaring. The work is on-going, and will provide an important long term study of the effects of re-settlements and changing land use policy on wildlife snaring.



Mike (on right, AWCF assistant) collecting poaching records from one of the conservancy scouts (on left).

### *Funding status*

The Lowveld wild dog project has recently received a grant from National Geographic and also from Sea World and Busch Gardens which have been of enormous help in purchasing the vehicle and the motorbike. Very generous support from private donors has also enabled us to purchase a couple more communications radios, uniforms for our scouts, the 9 radio and data logger collars and the drugs and darting equipment necessary for the forthcoming immobilisation work.

Ongoing costs, for which we are still seeking funding, include fuel (diesel for the car and petrol for the bikes), vehicle maintenance costs, wages for Rueben and Misheck for the wild dog work and general administration costs. We are also trying to raise funds to get an internet system set up at the wild-dog project base camp (~US\$3000) and for another radio receiver and aerial for more efficient tracking of the wild dogs once the collars are on.

We'll keep you updated with how the wild dog collaring goes and the other work that we will be doing during the denning season. For more regular updates, take a look at our blog:

<http://www.wildlifedirect.org/blogAdmin/Zimbabwewilddogs>

Also, other information regarding AWCF and its projects can be found on our website:

<http://www.africanwildlifeconservationfund.org/>

Lastly, for more information or for regular reports from the field, please contact Rosemary at:

[rosemary@africanwildlifeconservationfund.org](mailto:rosemary@africanwildlifeconservationfund.org)

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