

Project Update May /June 2011:

Hopes and Expectations

May and June are possibly the two months of the year we look forward to the most. It's denning season, and with that come the hopes and expectations of new life.

Last year we were saddened by and disappointed for the Kutanga pack when the alpha female lost her pups. We had been following the pack daily throughout her pregnancy when she disappeared. The rest of the pack hunted without her and demonstrated typical denning season behavior by heading straight back to the den after a successful hunt. We located the den site by tracking her collar with the help of the Hwange Lion Project plane. A few days later she was hunting with the pack and showed no signs of suckling pups or any interest in getting back to the den site. We were utterly dismayed. Greg, Jealous and Ester walked into the den site and confirmed that the dogs had indeed denned there but there was no sign of life. That was 2010. We did not expect a repeat of this in 2011, however, exactly the same scenario played out. The alpha female, named *Ester*, was clearly pregnant and we were anticipating a new litter. However we were soon alarmed when she disappeared from the pack again. With the help of the Lion Project plane, we located her, some 15km west of our office, on the outskirts of the small town of Dete.

Not a great place to den! Our APU were mobilized into the area to sweep for snares and maintain a protective presence. We watched with great concern. I had seen her myself a few days earlier and though she was pregnant, I didn't think she was close to giving birth. It was too early. Surely she had another two if not three weeks before she reached full term?

A couple of days later she was back with the rest of her pack and again showed no sign of suckling or interest in the den site. Greg walked in and

confirmed that a den did exist but there was no sign of life.

It took us a while to internalize this devastating news. We had never experienced anything like this before and speculated over the possible reasons. Greg has established a "body index scoring" protocol, which allows him to measure the physical condition of any individual dog from photographs. We have our well-fed Ukusutha pack as the model of what a dog should look like. The photographs of *Ester* showed that she was not in great physical shape and we speculated that she was not in good enough condition to carry the pregnancy through to full term. We have also consulted with veterinarians who have suggested that *Ester* may have a bacterial infection in her uterus. If this is the case then we have a plan for next year, if she manages to become pregnant again, which will entail treating her with specific anti biotics.

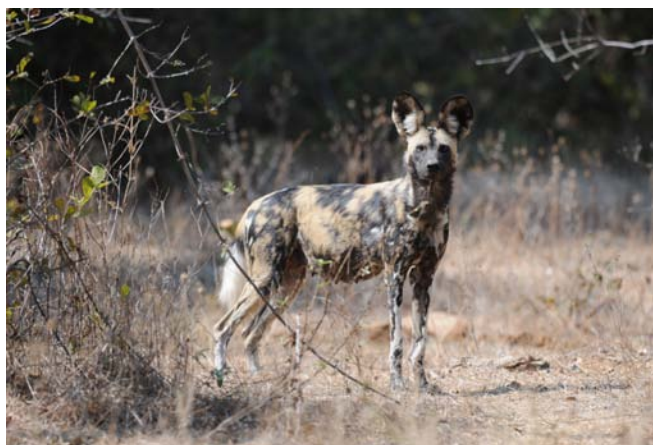
Below: The Secheche pack in Hwange.



The news on the other four packs in the area is encouraging, and while we don't know the exact location of their dens, sightings have provided us with enough information to be sure of the approximate location of the dens. So all in all it is an encouraging sign and we are eagerly awaiting sight of the pups themselves.

Mana Pools, our new study region in the north of Zimbabwe, is providing equal excitement and with the help of Professional Guide, Nick Murray,

we have the location of two dens. One belongs to alpha female *Tait*, of the Vundu Pack. Happily her GPS collar, which was fitted in November 2010, is still providing excellent information about her movements and made locating her den quite straightforward. Nick confirmed this on the ground. The second pack, now named the Long Pool Pack, are also denned. This is a smaller pack of nine dogs and yet to be collared. I will however be traveling up to Mana Pools at the beginning of July with the intention of collaring this pack as well.



Above: The alpha female of the Long Pool Pack (yet to be named)



Above: Alpha female Tait, of the Vundu pack, very pregnant.