

Project Update August 2009

Needle sharp teeth bit down on my thumb, causing me to jerk my hand back quickly. This was more of an instinctive reaction rather than caused by any real pain and with Jealous behind me laughing, I crawled forward on my stomach again, reaching further inside the den.



We were back at the den site at Robins Camp. I was surprised but somewhat relieved to find that the pups were still using the same den. As we drove towards the site through a huge bush fire I was concerned that this would prove to be another serious threat to the pups survival unless they had been moved. Two weeks had passed since we had first seen them, my return delayed mainly by a death in my family. A bush fire or indeed the original incident with the lions would be more than enough of a reason for the pups to have been moved. Luckily the fire had not actually reached the den site, though the fact that the pups were still in the same den served as another indication of the lack of any leadership within the pack. We have experience of alpha females or males immediately moving the pups to a new den following a serious incident with lions, most recently witnessed in 2006 with the Umtchibi pack.



We had borrowed a suitable cage trap from the Tikki Hywood Trust in Harare, however Jealous and Xmas felt that they could dig the pups out of the den given the relatively soft soil. This was a better option for us as we would be sure of catching all of the pups at one time,

unlike with the cage trap, which had no such guarantees. After setting up a perimeter of capture nets, just in case the pups made a run for it, we started digging. Management from the near by National Parks base accompanied us, willing to lend a hand if it were required. Quickly but carefully we dug away until we could see the pups. Lying on my stomach in the trench created, I crawled forward and reached inside for the nearest pup, which predictably sank its teeth into my thumb. I moved further forward and was able to gently but firmly get hold of one pup. After placing him in a transport crate I went back in for the next one and the next one until I had all five of them. It had only taken us a little over an hour from when we started digging to catching the last pup. Now we had a four-hour drive back to our rehabilitation facility and so arrived there just before nine in the evening.

Our concern now was helping the pups to settle down after what was obviously an ordeal for them. Our resident female, Angela, had shown surprisingly maternal instincts in the past, so we placed her in the enclosure next to the pups and left them for the night. We gave the pups some food as well. In the morning it was clear that the pups hadn't eaten much, a sign of their stress, as they were certainly hungry and have an astonishingly high metabolism at that age. We placed fresh food in the enclosure for them and watched from a distance. Again they did not eat much, but they were keen to join Angela and she seemed equally enthusiastic to be with them.



As ever we brain stormed. We did not want to loose the pups now, having intervened, their lives were definitely in our hands. Allowing Angela access to them had an element of risk to it, but we had to take the chance. We need not have worried, she went to the pups and they ran to her. Though still a bit nervous about their new surroundings, they took comfort from her relaxed demeanour. Now we had to get her to feed them. In the past she has shown a particularly selfish nature when feeding with other dogs, not wishing to share at all. She was brilliant with the pups though. Eating and eating before then regurgitating to them and they ate hungrily. We were so relieved. This continued for a couple of days and we allowed them all access into an even bigger enclosure during the days, which was more stimulating for them. To complete the picture we needed to introduce Angela's mate, Zenga. Again his track record gave us cause for concern, as he had proven to be a problem when introduced to other dogs, apart from Angela. We need not have worried, he was seen trying to feed the pups through the fence and when we opened the gate to let him in he fed them immediately. The pups had foster parents. Our aim now is to provide them with as natural an up bringing as we can, preparing them for a release back into the wild next year.