

Project Update February / March 2010:



The Kutanga pack are giving us cause for concern.

I prepared the dart as quickly as I could, testing the plunger, the needle, and its collar until I was happy. After filling it with 1.8 ml of our pre mixed drug cocktail of Ketamine and Xylazine, I pressurised it and loaded it into my darting rifle. It had taken three minutes but now I was ready and so, predictably, the dogs decided to walk away! I cursed under my breath. Not because I had Professor Tom Ogilvie – Graham with me, a most distinguished veterinarian from the UK, but because this was not the time to lose control.

The pack that was now slowly walking away from me in the pouring rain was the Kutanga pack and Bulls Eye, the alpha male, was with them. We hadn't seen him yet, but the signal from his collar told me he was there, somewhere in the long grass or hidden in the thick undergrowth. Then we saw him. He was easy to identify because he was limping along slowly on three legs. His front left leg held high up under his shoulder, clearly in pain, he was not prepared to put any weight on it. Tom held the darting rifle for me while I drove slowly along through the thick bush, trying to catch them up, wishing Jealous were with us. With his excellent eyesight and tracking skills I would have been more confident of staying with the pack, even in these horrendous conditions, however we had split up and were now out of radio range. I could not lose the pack. We had been searching for them for almost three weeks, since a report from our friends at The Hide had informed us that one of the pack was limping badly and Tom was due to leave in the morning.

We got close to the pack and I aimed at Bulls Eye, just as he walked on. Luckily I didn't press the trigger. Patience is needed when darting and I held on to mine despite the growing tension I was feeling. We followed behind again until they stopped and I was able to get along side them only 12 metres away. Bulls Eye was at the back of the pack and Moth, a young male, came up to him and started to lick the left leg that Bulls Eye was still holding high off the ground. Now we knew the injury was near his elbow. I waited for the opportunity and fired the dart. By no means the best shot I have ever made, I think the tension got to me, but the dart was in. The pack moved away and we followed again, trying not to lose sight of Bulls Eye through the pouring rain and watching the time, anxious for the five minutes it takes for the drug cocktail to work. Bulls Eye slowed and wobbled slightly on his three legs. He turned to look at us and then lay down in a



thicket, his head getting lower and lower until he was asleep. I manoeuvred the landrover through and around some more bushes until we were next to him. The rest of the pack looked on as we placed him on a blanket and Tom inspected the wound while I went about the rudimentary precautions of plugging Bulls Eye's ears and placing a blindfold on him. Ketamine and Xylazine work well but the anaesthesia is very light so we always do this and work quietly. The smell from the wound was terrible. It was full of maggots and very deep. Maybe a bite wound, certainly something had punctured very deep. I was relieved that it was not a broken leg, though Tom pointed out it was almost as bad as the tendon was infected and surgery may be necessary. Fifty

minutes later Bulls Eye started to come around, Tom quickly finished off what he could do under the conditions and was

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happy enough. He had really cleaned the wound and given long acting anti – biotic plus treatment to keep the wound as clean and free from flies as possible. Now only time would tell, Tom estimated that it would be three weeks before we would see any sign of improvement and if there wasn't any by then, we should consider getting Bulls Eye to a vet for surgery.



Bulls Eye was fully awake and calling for his pack mates. After a bit of manoeuvring I got us back into the open and we saw the pack searching around. They stopped to look at us and then headed back towards where we had left Bulls Eye for a reunion we were delighted to witness. I checked the damage to my landrover, caused by the “bush bashing” that has been required to get up close to the pack in the first place. It wasn't too bad and we headed back towards the PDC office, some two hours away. We met Jealous on the way and his grin was as wide as ever when we told our story, which he would only believe when I showed him the photographs!

This was the second incident involving the Kutanga pack in as many weeks. Squirrel, already being treated for a painful swelling, had recently undergone surgery to amputate a badly broken leg. He had been seen limping badly by Jealous and our friend Roger Parry.. Closer examination had confirmed a broken leg and PDC staff led by Foggie, jumped into action. Roger has a lot of experience with darting wildlife and Foggie asked him to help as I had just returned from our USA / UK fundraising trip and was still one day's drive away. This situation could not wait that long and I talked to Roger over the phone, while Foggie alerted a vet, Dr. Stevenage, in Bulawayo. Roger darted Squirrel and they loaded him into Foggie's landrover for the four-hour drive to Bulawayo. Xmas was with them and Jealous stayed monitoring the pack.

Dr. Stevenage phoned me when they arrived at his surgery and we discussed the extent of Squirrel's injuries. I asked him to do the best he could and he pinned the broken leg and cut away the swelling, which turned out to be a non-malignant tumour. Four days later however the pin came away and there was no other option but to amputate. Roger was not around this time so our friend from the Hwange Lion Project, Brent Staplekamp, offered assistance. Martin Steimer and Foggie drove him to Dr. Stevenage again. We have seen three-legged dogs in the wild survive for many years and felt that this was the best option for Squirrel. Even a few more months in the wild was going to be better than euthanasia and now at least he was not in any pain. After some recuperation time, Squirrel will be reunited with his pack. It was while Jealous was out searching for the pack, with a view to us reintroducing Squirrel that the report on Bulls Eye came in.

We have never dealt with such incidents before and were very grateful for the assistance of Roger Parry, Brent Staplekamp, Dr. Stevenage and Professor Tom Ogilvie – Graham. Greg and I have since speculated over the distances the pack is covering in search of available prey and wonder if the injuries are not related to that. We will never know for sure, maybe it's just simple bad luck, but a dog's life is not one you would ever envy and our concerns for the pack's welfare are real.

All of this was going on while the Bush Camp quietly worked its magic in the background. The school programme is again interrupted in Zim, with teachers on strike so Wilton has worked over time to ensure that the children do not miss their once in a lifetime opportunity. He has been to every school and got the message out that the Bush camp is open. Each school has been given a date and a guarantee that the children will be picked up on that date. A recent booking by a school in Harare tested Wilton and his team who had to conduct three back-to-back camps, just to ensure that the Children from Gwayi Primary School were not disappointed.

Professor Tom Ogilvie – Graham had not come out to Zimbabwe to assist me with an injured dog, though of course he didn't mind. He had actually come as a Trustee of Wildlife Vets International, to see what PDC does and bring vaccines for rabies and distemper, which we needed for a programme we had set up with the Government Vet in Hwange, Dr. Zishiri. Over a two-day period, Dr. Zishiri gave us four of his staff to carry out the vaccination of domestic dogs in the region. In total we vaccinated over 450 dogs, treated most of them for worms and other conditions. Our motivation for this was simply to help the painted dog population by reducing the chances of rabies or distemper spreading from the domestic dog population into the wild. It was a rather good PR operation as well.



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Thus a very, very busy and testing start to the year. I was proud of the PDC staff who have shown great determination and resolve already this year, especially after such a tough time last year. Greg and I were happy to be able to fit in a quick visit to our friends and supporters in the USA and UK and were delighted by the continued level of support and commitment afforded us. I have said it before but will never get tired of saying that we cannot do what we do without you. Thank you.



It's still raining hard!



A Happy “Customer” at one of the vaccination clinics.

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