

Project Update July / Aug 2011:

The Ukusutha take another big step.

Jealous and I watched the Ukusutha pack feeding on an impala, rather like proud parents watching their children achieve something special. This was the third kill the Ukusutha had made. Greg had enjoyed watching the first two kills and now this third kill provided evidence that they had, indeed, taken another huge step from being dependant on humans for their food. A fourth kill the following afternoon really sealed the deal!



On the roller coaster of life of Painted Dog Conservation this was a high, a great moment to hold onto. We had made the decision two years ago to bring the dogs into our Rehab Facility, and with that decision came a lot of responsibility. Raising them was never going to be the issue, as our resident dogs, Angela and Zenga, took up the role of foster parents. However, getting them back into the wild was always going to be challenging and witnessing them take such a huge step in that direction was tremendous. They are far from in the clear though. Life in the wild is never an easy ride and they still have much to learn. Their encounters with lions and hyenas on the reserve have so far gone well. Pack strength is working in their favour, allowing them to defend their kills from hyena and they have been seen chasing two lions away. We know there will be many more challenges for them though.

As if to underline the struggle for life, my phone rang and brought me back to earth. Three dogs

had been spotted and photographed by clients staying at The Hide Safari Camp. Closer examination of the photos revealed that one was carrying a snare around her neck. When we received the photos that afternoon we needed only a second to identify the dogs as the Kutanga females. *Juliette* had been snared and to make matters worse, *Bullseye* was missing. We needed to find the dogs and find them fast. I left Jealous in Vic Falls with Edward to watch over the Ukusutha and drove back to Hwange.



Foggie, PDC's Assistant Manager is excellent in a crisis. During my two-hour drive from Vic Falls to PDC she had already organised a plane for the next day.

I didn't sleep well that night and got up early. After making coffee, I got into my Land Rover and drove into the bush.

The signal from Juliette's collar soon reached my ears--- the familiar beep, beep beep, confirming she was close by. I frantically checked for the other collars. Alpha female *Ester* was there, as was the third female, named *Shoulder Patch*. However, Alpha male *Bullseye* was still missing. I followed the three females and managed to look at Juliette through my binocoulours. I could see that the snare had not cut into her neck. She was lucky. She had a wound on the side of her mouth and another behind her left front leg. Neither looked too serious and my tension eased a little, but *Bullseye* was still missing and so the priority.

The plane arrived and after thirty minutes we had fixed the tracking equipment to the wing struts and were ready. A 20-minute flight was all it took to locate *Bullseye*, approximately 10 kilometres northeast of Ganda Lodge. The collars we fit onto the dogs have three signals: a moving, a resting and a mortality signal. The signal I was receiving from *Bullseye's* collar suggested he was moving. We landed and quickly drove to the nearest point, picking up some anti-poaching scouts on the way. I was listening to the signal as we walked into the bush and it changed to a resting pulse. We hurried along and came across the brutal scenes of his death.

The remains of *Bullseye's* body were still caught by the cruel snare. Vultures had been feeding on his carcass, creating the movement that had given rise to the false hope. I was devastated and dropped to my knees by his side. The snare, made from copper telephone wire, encircled his waist. Witnessing these scenes does not get any easier no matter how many times you see it. The agony of his death is hard to imagine. My despair turned to anger as I surveyed the scene. We recovered 15 snares that had accounted for an elephant and an impala, as well as *Bullseye*.



Juliette was now the priority and two days of searching by Greg and me were frustratingly fruitless. Greg headed back out into the depths of Hwange NP, as we knew these females could and would cover 20 or more kilometres in a day. I concentrated on the local search.

“MK” phoned me in the evening to report that the Kutanga females were at the rehab. I was more relaxed now, though determined as ever to help *Juliette*. I drove out at 5:00 am the next morning. The dogs were still at the rehab but not in a position that would allow me to get close enough to dart *Juliette*. Happily they soon moved off and I followed, as they chased a small herd of sable with misplaced optimism rather than actual intent. They soon came to a rest in the thick teak woodland and I had my chance to get close enough. I darted *Juliette* and she soon fell into a drug-induced sleep. With “MK” and Maria helping me, we soon cleaned up *Juliette's* wounds, fitted her with a new GPS collar and returned her to her pack. A roller coaster ride one shared by all of you.

On another note, our extremely successful Children’s Bush Camp has now hosted 5,000 children and continues to inspire the kids that are the hope for the future. The extension of this work into the communities via our Conservation Clubs continues to be ever-popular and in July we ran another Nature Corner competition with Lupote School, again claiming first place. It was great to see Hankano, one of the smaller schools, claim second place and the judges’ overall comments being tremendously encouraging.

