

## **Project Update May / June 2010:**



### **The challenges of raising pups in the wild.**

Our fears were confirmed when Greg and Ester walked into the den site. There was no sign of life. The Kutanga pack had moved 25 km away two days before this, something they would never do if they still had pups, which is why we checked the den site. We had seen the alpha female “Ester” mating in April and watched her closely during the weeks of her pregnancy, Jealous often expressing concern that she “looked a bit thin.” We calculated her due date and received confirmation of the den site via the GPS collar fitted onto Bulls Eye, one of the males in the pack. During the period May 31<sup>st</sup> to June 7<sup>th</sup> the GPS collar on Bulls Eye confirmed that he and thus the pack returned to the same place each day and by doing so he gave away the position of the den site.

The pups were born on May 31<sup>st</sup>. We were obviously excited and eagerly awaiting the day when we would be able to see the pups. Jealous saw the pack hunting in the Hwange Main Camp area on June 8<sup>th</sup>, which is roughly 10 km in a straight



*Ester and Jealous fitted the new GPS collar on Bulls Eye*

line from the den site. The alpha female was with the pack and he knew immediately that something was wrong. The pups were only a week old, she should have been with them! We monitored them over the next couple of days as they hunted many kilometres from the den, trying to remain positive, as the female was not with them. Then one evening she was there, they had killed a kudu and looked very full. We have learnt over the years that during denning season the pack eat quickly and waste no time in rushing straight back to the den to feed the pups and/or any adults left on “pup guarding” duty. We sat in silence, rather despondent, watching the pack playing, they had no desire to go anywhere and as night closed in quickly around us, we drove home. Early the following morning we located the pack again and followed them on their 25 km trek.

We have of course speculated over the fate of the pups. The distances the pack have been covering and continue to cover each day to find enough food are probably the best indicator of what happened. Much of Greg’s Doctoral Thesis concentrated on the cost of hunting in terms of energy used. It’s our belief that the alpha female was not getting enough food and though she carried the pregnancy full term, we believe that the pups born would have been very weak and she was unable to suckle them due to her own malnourishment, so they died. Our concerns over the state of the Hwange ecosystem have been growing and growing. Suitable prey species for the dogs have declined dramatically over the last 30 years and we are seeing the evidence of this now on a daily basis. Packs are covering more than 12 km a day hunting, when even in the late 1990s the average was only 6 km. Put simply, the energy they spend on such hunts may not be replenished by what they catch, which is obviously not a sustainable situation. We have already stepped up our lobbying of National Parks Management, urging them to implement changes in the face of the growing evidence and this situation is driving our new position on how we use our Rehabilitation Facility.

Against such a bleak backdrop, our Children’s Bush Camp continues to bring a ray of sunshine and a smile to our faces. After the School’s Easter Holidays, we opened up again for a busy month, with the children from Dopota, Mabale and Dete Primary Schools all enjoying their week-long camp. The signs of the Bush Camp’s success continue to come in with children being ever eager to learn. Wilton finds that the children are more excited than ever and so well prepared when he visits them the day before they are due to attend the camp, one chilled from Dopota asking if she could stay for two weeks not one, though she has never even seen the camp before!! Wilton has also added a new quiz to the curriculum, which is more fun for the children and challenges them and their teachers to really focus on the lessons taught so that they score the highest marks possible.

#### **Painted Dog Conservation**

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