

Project Update November 2010:

Monitoring dogs in Mana Pools.



November was a pivotal month for Painted Dog Conservation. After many years of trying, we finally succeeded in our ambitions to begin monitoring the dogs in Mana Pools. “Mana” is a key national and regional population and as such, collecting data on pack numbers, individuals and their movements is considered vital.

To this end, I went to Mana Pools with long time dog friend and chairman of PDC Netherlands, Ron van der A. For me it was a real “bus man’s holiday” as we had a single focus. Apart from a cooling swim in the



The dogs enjoy playing in water.

Zambezi River after we arrived at Vundu Camp, hot and bothered from our long drive, it was all about the dogs. Vundu camp is owned and run by Nick and Desiree Murray. It was purely by chance that we booked to stay at the camp, however it was soon clear that we had made the right choice as Nick is almost as fanatical about the dogs as we are and has years of experience operating in Mana Pools.

We set out at 4:00 AM the following morning, the sky heavy and threatening rain. The temperature quickly soared to impossibly uncomfortable degrees. Nick knows Mana Pools like the back of his hand and we dissected the place, hindered by the limited road network. By 10:00 AM we were extremely hot and frustrated, then Desiree called on the radio. The dogs, the Vundu pack, had been seen to the west the day before, on the Wilderness Safari Concession. Nick sought permission for us to drive onto their private concession, which was granted without any hesitation. Mana Pools is a remote place and the operators there work cooperatively with each other and we have a good relationship with Wilderness through our work in Hwange, however we were all delighted by their willingness to help. It got even better, as they had actually seen the dogs that morning, while on a game drive with their clients. One of the guides knew me from our work on Starvation Island and he took us to the spot where the dogs had been resting just an hour before. Nick and I walked into the thick bush, dodging elephant herds and hoping that the lion we had just seen was walking the other way! I was thinking that it would have been good to have Jealous with us to track them down but I need not have worried. Nick’s tracking was as good as any I have seen and we soon found the dogs resting in a dry river bed. It was 11:30 AM and really, really hot. It felt like my eyeballs were melting!! Far too hot to even think about darting dogs and so we watched them for a short while before they moved on into thicker bush.



We came back in the afternoon and Nick tracked them down again while guiding us around a large bull elephant. He lost the tracks on hard ground and we searched around a little, before looking at a distant tree line and simultaneously saying “they must be over there.” Sure enough they were. The tree line marked another dry riverbed but the dogs had found a last remaining puddle of water in a bend in the river. It was muddy and smelly but particularly inviting as a way to cool down and avoid the annoying flies. We sat quietly on the bank of the river above them, not much more than 20 metres away. Ron was with us this time and we counted over and over again but could not come up with the same number of individuals in the pack. I had never seen so many dogs in one pack. I gave up counting so I could just enjoy sitting with them, watching them play happily together.

Elephants eventually disturbed the dogs and they reluctantly left their precious muddy puddle. We edged back to the vehicle as night fell, nervously avoiding the same elephant herds but so happy that we had found the pack.

At 4:00 AM the next day we set out again and in typical dog following tradition we could not find them. Completely frustrated we returned to camp at midday and did what we could to keep cool in the blistering heat. The offer of an afternoon on the river, swimming and generally taking it easy was so tempting but we stuck to our mission and went out again to bounce around in the Land Rover looking for mystical dogs. Nothing. But the rains finally came and relieved the oppressive heat.

4:00 AM again. Our last morning. We drove around with increased tension and saw impala running hard through the bush. Straining our eyes through binoculars we searched for the dogs but could not see anything and kept moving. Nick picked up what could have been the footprint of one dog. However because it was only one and not 20+ we moved on and turned down into the riverbed where they had been resting the two days prior. This time he stopped the car and leapt out quickly to confirm the footprints of at least 18 dogs walking through the deep sand. We raced around and finally caught up with them on an airstrip near to where we had seen the impala running. It was almost the perfect situation for darting dogs. Open ground, good shade trees nearby and water. However, the dogs were quite full. Normally we do not dart a dog when its stomach is full, however we were under some pressure and luckily we had a vet with us from the USA, who happened to be a guest at the camp. I decided it was worth the risk and we closed in on the alpha female.



Always curious



The darting and collar fitting were all done quickly and efficiently and soon the alpha female, now named Tait, after Nick's daughter, was back with her pack, wearing a GPS collar.



The GPS collar fitted, I prepare to carry Tait back to her waiting pack mates.

We waited with them for another couple of hours and finally agreed that there were 23 dogs in the pack. Mana Pools is quite inaccessible during the rainy season and so the GPS collar will give us vital data on the pack's movements during this period. We drove back to Harare, tired but very pleased that this first "mission" had been so successful.

Despite what I now consider to be the usual difficulties, it had been another successful year for PDC. Wilton and his team supervised more schools than ever before through our Children's Bush Camp programme, including one from Zambia. Our anti poaching units have worked well with National parks and we have been encouraged by the sightings of new packs of dogs in Hwange National Park.

It's your support that continues to make this possible and we cannot thank you enough for that. We are of course looking forward to working with you again in 2011.



Safely back with her pack.