

# THE AFRICAN HUNTING DOG **BORN TO BE WILD**

The fascinating life habits of the extraordinarily efficient, highly social, much-maligned and severely endangered denizen of the African bush

The large, roundish ears of the African Wild (or Hunting) Dog *Lycaon pictus* and its mottled coat are two unmistakable diagnostic features of the species.

*Lycaon pictus* is the scientific name of the African Wild Dog. It means "painted wolf" and refers to the colourful, patchy coat of many shades; their bushy tail with a white tip may serve as a flag to keep the pack in contact while hunting. They are poorly named, as they are not even dogs, though it is believed that they share a common ancestry with wolves. No two wild dogs are marked the same, and scientists still do not know the reason for this. The African Wild Dog is in serious decline, and the reasons are complex and many; for a start wild dogs are rare, and increas-

gly under pressure from humans - often killed in wire snares set by poachers, or killed by game farmers. The species have now been eradicated from 25 of the 39 countries that formed its historical range, and now they can now only be found in pockets of southern and eastern Africa. However, Lions are also one of the main causes of adult pup mortality, and the wild dog is now the most endangered carnivore in Africa with total numbers of around 6,600 individuals of which only 1,400 are mature - according IUCN's latest 2012 estimate. The average litter size is high, at just over 10 pups,

but there are many threats to the survival of the litter by predators and disease, and only around half of the pups survive their first year of life. A typical wild dog hunt is preceded by a noisy rally, which continues until all dogs are ready and prepared for hunting. Once rallied, the pack sets out. Owing to their good stamina wild dogs do not rely on ambushing their targets, instead, the pack fans out and pursues the prey at speed. They are often out-run initially, but over a distance of several kilometres the exhausted prey is run down. Most of the hunting takes place at early morning or later

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The alpha male of the *Lycaon pictus* pack observed by the author - instantly recognizable by its battle-scarred veteran looks!



*The relentless chase is on  
and there is no hope for the prey*



When prey is targeted, some of the Dogs run close to the animal, while others follow behind, taking over when the leaders tire. Owing to their good stamina Wild Dogs do not rely on ambushing their targets, instead, the pack fans out and pursues at speed. They are often out-run initially, but over a distance of several kilometres the exhausted prey is run down.

afternoon when it is cooler, and during the hot day-time hours the pack often sleeps. They are less likely to run into competition from other competing predators like lions and hyenas, when hunting this way. During the week I stayed in Botswana's Kwando Reserve, we were only able to locate the pack four times and always in the afternoon. I used one Nikon D3s and one D700 body with Nikon lenses 600mm f/4, 300mm f/2.8 or 70-200mm f/2.8 and a big beanbag; the large aperture lenses, are ideal. But photographing the wild dog is easier said than done. In Botswana the home range of one single pack can exceed 700 square kilometres (in Serengeti 2,000 sq km); so locating

the pack is often the biggest challenge. The pack we were looking for consisted of one alpha male and female, 9 other non-breeding adults, and 9 youngsters 8 months old. The alpha male and female have the sole breeding rights within the group, and the pair will often lead the pack when hunting. As the wild dogs spread out to cover a bigger area, you never know where the kill is going to be. The wild dogs are ravenous feeders consuming their prey very quickly to avoid the detection and confrontation from hyenas and predators like lions. All is eaten and often only small tell-tale signs remain to give clues to the site of a kill. By feeding fast and eating the prey's intestines too wild dogs will also

absorb a lot of fluids from their prey, and therefore they can go on for long periods without drinking. When water is plentiful, like during my visit, they will bathe and play in muddy water with great delight. This is one of the most unique animals that I have ever come across. Every individual of a wild dog pack has the responsibility to care for or providing for the alpha female's large litter. What impressed me is how gentle and considerate they are with each other; and watching them interacting together was endlessly entertaining with the constant chattering of the easily excitable youngsters. Every social activity plays a part in forming social bonds and hierarchy.

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*The African Wild Dog - a social and highly intelligent animal - has been vilified and persecuted into extinction over most of its range.*



African Wild Dogs are rarely seen, even where they are relatively common, and it appears that populations have always existed in very low densities. The "big five" which most tourists want to see in Africa have been a successful marketing story - however, it can be argued that this has been to the detriment of other less well-know species, such as the African Wild Dog.



*Surveying the bush before starting their deadly chase*

A typical wild dog hunt is preceded by a noisy rally, which continues until all dogs are ready and prepared for hunting. Once rallied, the pack sets out. Relying on their good eyesight the wild dogs spot their prey, and then give chase.





Wild Dogs need to be fast eaters to avoid confrontations with other predators – both lions and hyenas never need an invitation to challenge Wild Dogs for their meal.



In order not to attract hyenas and lions, the Wild Dogs are very careful not to puncture the stomach, which could alert these bigger predators gifted with a keen sense of smell. Being so much larger, lions are a real 24-hour threat to Wild Dogs and their youngsters, and by some estimates 25% of all Wild Dog deaths can be attributed to lions.





The pack has killed a female impala with a young fawn, and we observed at close range one of the young Wild Dogs running around holding the head of the baby impala as a trophy – and all of the other youngsters chasing it.

Unfortunately, because of their social nature diseases like rabies and canine distemper can spread rapidly and severely affect individual Wild Dog populations.

Alpha females often utilise old aardvark burrows for their den, and the same den can be used for several years. In the breeding season after a litter is born, they will limit their traveling and hunting in areas closer to the den. All the females cooperate in raising the pups, and kills are shared, and when one is made some distance from the den, adults return with meat to regurgitate to the young pups. According to the Botswana Predator Conservation Trust the cooperative hunting is likely to be the main reason why the Wild Dog is the most effective hunter in Africa in terms of kills to hunting attempts: Wild Dogs: 44%, Cheetahs 41%, Spotted Hyenas 35%, Lions 27%. I should add that all the 3 hunts that I witnessed were successful. Spending a week in the territory of wild dogs was an unforgettable experience. Unfortunately the population of Africa's most endangered carnivore is decreasing in spite of meaningful conservation efforts in South Africa, Botswana, and East Africa. Development of Wild Dog tourism ventures and other new initiatives are however evidence of how conservation NGOs are working hard to find new ways to establish a lasting place for the "underdogs" in a developing continent.



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