



## Painted Dog Conservation News Year 2006

**January 2006:** The current rainy season is one of the best people can remember around here, the promise of good crops in the fields lifting everyone's spirits. For the wildlife too, the coming year already promises to be one of plenty. Hwange National Park looks amazing, the bush so thick and vibrant, which makes game viewing difficult; however there is life everywhere, seemingly in great abundance. The hugely debated elephant population are noticeable by their absence, adding more fuel to the arguments over population densities and numbers. With so much water about, every pan and depression in the sandy soil full or overflowing, this is indeed a time of plenty, unless, you happen to be searching for dogs!!!!

Ask Jealous, next time you see him, what it is like to search for the dogs in an immense African thunderstorm!! He will greet you with his famous smile if you talk about the rains in relation to the crops in his fields, but you will get a different reaction if you ask him about tracking the dogs at this time of year. Only last week, we had to send a rescue party out to pull him from the mud!! Luckily he was within the range of our radio network and so he was able to call in and give his position. We drove out to him through an impossible storm, visibility reduced to a metre or so in front of the tdi. We found him sat in the back of his landrover, looking like the proverbial drowned rat!! His landrover does not have any windows. He was stuck axle deep and it took us a while to dig and then pull his vehicle out. He was concerned that he had "lost" the Umtchibi pack; I was concerned that he would catch pneumonia and quickly drove him home in my Tdi, so he could take a hot shower and get some warm food inside himself.

Our adventures earlier in the month had been a lot more rewarding, even in the rain. The Umtchibi pack have quickly filled the void left by the Sethule, who dissolved as a pack following the death of the alpha male towards the end of 2004 and the disappearance of the alpha female during 2005, being at least nine years old, she has probably died as well.

Greg managed to get the first collar on the Umtchibi pack in November last year, however two of the adults have dispersed from the pack since then and so we were concerned that we would lose our ability to locate them if the collared dog also dispersed, thus a concerted effort was made to fit at least one more collar. So, 5am brought on a familiar scene of Jealous and I driving out to find a pack of dogs, coffee in hand.

The rains wash away the spoor (footprints) that Jealous can usually follow with ease, while the thick bush absorbs the signal emanating from the radio collar, which means that we have to get within approximately one kilometre of the dog wearing the collar before we will get a signal. One kilometre out of a home range of over 750 square kilometres, that takes some doing.

However, we know the dogs like no other, except Greg of course; who's intensive "training" had prepared us many years ago. Discussing all the recent sightings as we drove along, Jealous and I determined our main search area and began to dissect it, listening through the headphones for that familiar high pitched "beep", sent out by the radio collar and picked up by the receiver in my Tdi. After a couple of hours driving the signal came in; beep, beep, beep.

While driving around we use an omni directional antenna to pick up the signal from the radio collar. This type of antenna picks up the signal but does not give any hint of the direction, so we quickly switched to the directional antenna and homed in on the dog's position. We soon found the dog wearing the collar, named "Beans" and the rest of his pack mates, lying around a small rain water pan, their stomachs indicating that they had clearly enjoyed a good meal the night before or a snack that very morning; five adults and nine hyper active pups.

As Jealous and I prepared the darts, the pups moved around the vehicle, very relaxed, investigating tyres, hot exhaust pipes and any loose brake cables or wires. With the rifle and darts



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ready, Jealous identified the alpha male and slowly manoeuvred the Tdi into position so I could dart him. Using a range finder, I determined the distance, set the pressure gauge on the rifle accordingly and took aim. Jealous touched me on the shoulder and whispered "leopard". I turned around, a puzzled expression on my face "did you say leopard?" As I uttered these words, the place erupted, dogs racing after the leopard, which made it to the safety of a near by tree. The noise was deafening, fourteen over excited dogs and one snarling leopard perched up a tree. However it was over in a matter of seconds, the dogs having showed the leopard, who was boss, returned to their leafy shade and the leopard jumped down and melted away.

Grinning from ear to ear, Jealous and I turned our attention back onto the dogs and I darted the alpha male, who flinched slightly as the dart hit him, then walked down to the pan for a drink. This we did not want, as he could actually drown when he began to succumb to the anaesthetising drugs while lying in the water. We moved closer and as soon as it was obvious that the drugs had taken effect we jumped out of the Tdi and picked him up. The rest of the pack stood ten metres away watching us. The darted dog was fine and without further delay we fitted his protective radio collar with our "audience" of thirteen dogs watching every move.

With the collar fitted we moved "Pita" into the shade of a thick bush, well away from the water and gave him the reversal injection. By now the rest of the pack had got bored and moved some 50 metres away into their own shade bush. After a few minutes Pita began to wake up and stagger around, looking for his pack. One of the pups saw him and began to approach cautiously, probably wondering why his father was behaving so strangely. Once he was sure it was his father, he mobbed him, in some sort of a role reversal of the "Prodigal Son". The rest of the pack could not ignore this and all joined in, racing around, excitedly, seemingly welcoming the return of their missing leader.

**April 2006:** While Greg and I undertook our annual USA / European Tour, visiting many friends and "rattling the can" to bring in the much needed funds, life at PDC continued without missing a beat. The projects work is gaining more and more international recognition, testament to the dedication and commitment of our staff.

Foggie Wilson, our Office Manager, handles the day to day logistics in her inimitable, matriarchal way, while Wilton Nsimango works tirelessly to ensure that the Children's Bush Camp continues to deliver its life changing experience for so many of the local children. During the months of February and March over 170 children from 5 schools visited the camp on our extended 4-day programme. Wilton supplements these camps by visiting the schools before and after each camp, thus he conducted 20 school visits during the same period, which is very exhausting work for him, carried out with a permanent smile on his face. Closed for the school holidays now, much maintenance work is being undertaken by Dought Nkomo and his team.

Martin Muserere, our Computer Training Coordinator, continues to deliver a first class programme for many of the local peoples. He has conducted over 7500 hours of lessons since the programme began last year, almost 2000 of those hours this year alone and seen 240 students graduate from the course.

Sikhosana keeps a tight rein on the APU, deploying them for maximum effect. Poaching levels thus remain low in the core areas patrolled, but there is still concern about the poaching in the eastern Gwayi plus the eastern boundary of Hwange National Park and the area to the far west of us, where there is again encroachment into Hwange National Park. The truth of the matter is that there are still not enough professional anti poaching units in the region, we continue to provide training and support for the landowners in the Gwayi who are showing interest in deploying anti



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poaching units. While every snare that is collected in is a plus, the problem nonetheless, remains massive.

The dogs of course are the main focus of everything and as usual Jealous stepped up to the task of keeping an eye on them. The Umtchibi pack, continue to flourish within the sanctuary of Hwange National Park, the pups growing before ones eyes as the very capable adults provide plenty of food for them. The pack is still fifteen strong and are regularly seen in an around the Main Camp area. However we are perhaps more delighted by the progress being made of the "Mashambo" pack, which comprises of only two adults and three pups, these pups are huge!! Testament to how well the parents are feeding them and though they are still a fragile pack in terms of the age and experience of the dogs, we are optimistic that another litter this year will take the pack up to a more effective unit. With Jealous picking up additional sightings of two packs in the Eastern Gwayi, one comprising of 7 dogs and the other comprising of 4 dogs plus a pack of 11 dogs to the west of us at Masuma Dam, the overall situation is looking very good, even Agula and Ukula are still being seen every day. I need only check the fuel log to see how many kilometres Jealous has driven to gather this information; I know only too well how uncomfortable all those kilometres are in his battered old landrover.

To cap of a very positive period of dog sightings, the National Parks staff at Tashinga, in Matusadhona, has been reporting on the good progress of our "Tashinga" pack, which we released into the wild last year. Not only are the four dogs doing well, they also seem to have stimulated "dog activity" in the region, as sightings are coming in of other dogs, not previously seen there. Needless to say we are very keen to make the arduous journey back to Matusadhona, once we have confirmation that it is again possible to cross the numerous rivers that dissect the region.

**May 2006:** May turned into one of those months we will never forget, thanks largely to a single exercise concerning the translocation<sup>16</sup> painted dogs from South Africa to our Rehabilitation facility in Hwange. A quite exhausting 4-day operation was the culmination of many months' negotiation and frustration.

In August 2005 we received a letter from the South African North West Parks Board, asking if we were interested in receiving a pack of dogs from Pilansberg National Park, which were "surplus" to requirements. In fact the letter stated that they had heard that we would be interested. Rather surprised with the "surplus to requirements" aspect, we none the less spoke to the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA), who immediately supported the proposal and issued the relevant paperwork within a week. Then we waited, and waited, for the go ahead from South Africa, looking at our crowded diaries, almost on a weekly basis, to see when we could make the trip, if and when we got the go ahead. Months went by, during which time we heard that certain elements in South Africa were suggesting euthanasia for the "surplus" pack!! This strengthened our resolve of course and we remained determined, the translocation taking on more of a rescue mission now in our hearts and minds. George In der Maur and his Dutch based SOS Wild dog Foundation pledged to cover the entire cost of the translocation, having been the first to hear of the packs plight.

The Pilansberg management clearly wanted the dogs to come to Zimbabwe and the communication channels remained open, euthanasia was not an option to them either.

Finally, this month, we received the final confirmation that the translocation had been approved and with the paperwork issued we set off on Tuesday morning, a 15-hour drive from Hwange to Pilansberg ahead of us. John Lemon and his colleague Jon Keates, were with me, George was already in South Africa, waiting for us. On the way we collected a truck, which had been specially



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modified, with a cage on the back, suitable for carrying the dogs. The drive was too much, delays at the border and busy traffic on the narrow, unlit roads at night determined that it was not safe to continue and we found a hotel room for the night. Upon reaching South Africa on the Wednesday afternoon, John recommended further modifications to the truck, to ensure that the dogs would be as safe and comfortable as possible.

Early Friday morning saw us driving to the facility that was holding the dogs. The South African vet and his team prepared their equipment as we prepared ours, aiming to fit protective collars to each dog at this stage so that we would not have to put the dogs through the stress of a further immobilization prior to their release. The process began, the vet darting each dog in turn and his team bringing them to us, a collar fitted, identification photos taken of each one before they were placed in the back of the truck. After approx two hours we had the 16 dogs in the truck and the vet gave them the reversal injection to wake them up.

Now we could set off on the arduous drive back to Hwange, knowing that we could not find a hotel to rest this time around, even if we wanted too. For the dogs benefit, we had to keep driving as they relax and sleep together if the vehicle keeps moving, however once it stops, they often wake up and can become stressed at being in a relatively confined space.

We reached the border at 10pm and after three hours of queues, more red tape and more queues; we were back in Zimbabwe, with only another 8 hours to go!! A quick refuelling stop in Bulawayo, a cup of coffee and we continued as the sun rose behind us.

We arrived in Hwange at 9.30am, completely exhausted. However the remarkable reception committee immediately revitalized us. The Zimbabwe Minister of Environment, ZPWMA officials from Head Office in Harare and Hwange Main Camp and the national media were all there to greet us. This compared to the fact that we did not meet a single official from the South African National Parks Board during the whole exercise, which was rather surprising and a bit disappointing.

Many people, too many people, are quick to criticize Zimbabwe, however this exercise alone shows the level of commitment towards conservation, which exists within the country and many of its officials. The dogs have settled in well and we will hold them now for two or three months before releasing them into the wilds of Hwange National Park,

Another frustrating day of waiting followed as the ZPWMA representatives who were travelling with us had to wade their way through even more red tape. It would have been easy for them to give up but they were as determined as we were and eventually met up with us on the Thursday evening.

**June 2006:** After last month's drama, surrounding the translocation of a pack of painted dogs from South Africa, I am happy to report that June has been a wonderful month for dog sightings.

The biggest excitement actually came late in the month when Jealous and I found the den of our Umtchibi pack. For once it is in a reasonably accessible area and so we are eagerly waiting many happy weeks of puppy watching!! The relative ease with which we found the den was testament to the years of hard work we have put in, getting to know dogs and their behaviour. Greg, of course, was our teacher but I am happy to say we were good pupils.

Jealous had seen the female a week earlier, "very pregnant", so we knew she had now denned, the question was, where?? We discussed the recent sightings of the dogs and came to a mutual decision on the search area, based on the knowledge gained from Greg that dogs have a typical



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denning home range of 100 square kilometres, hunting in a five kilometre radius from the den. The sightings discussed, maps scrutinised and a decision made, we set out on a bitterly cold morning, the usual cup of coffee in hand. We dissected the area we had selected, as the roads permitted, using two vehicles as we had visitors with us from the USA. After a couple of hours I picked up the signal from the alpha males collar, a familiar beep, beep detected by my sensitive ears through the painful static. I stopped, a big grin on my face and called Jealous on the radio.

"I have found the dogs, the signal is strong, what's your location?"

"I have also found the dogs" he replied. "I found them thirty minutes ago and have been trying to call you!! What's wrong with your radio?"

"Nothing's wrong with my radio, where are you?"

He gave me his position and I drove there. They were in the block we had predicted. I picked up the signal from the south side, while Jealous found it on the north side. He was a lot closer to the pack and greeted me with an even bigger grin. We sat listening to the beeps for a while, as the dogs rested, out of sight in the near by bush. Happy with our find, we headed back to camp. In the evening we followed them as they hunted, only to lose the signal after they entered a huge tract of forest with no roads. We went back to camp a little disappointed, however we knew that the den location would be confirmed if we found the pack in the same spot in the morning. At 4.30am we set off again and were rewarded in the best way possible as the pack came out of the bush to "greet us", confirming beyond doubt that this was the den location. Now we will wait for approximately three weeks, which is when the pups will become active, leaving the den to explore and play.

Our APU were also in the headlines again this month, when they arrested two poachers. As alert as ever, they discovered a series of freshly set snares and so sat in ambush through the night, waiting for the poachers to return. Predictably they did and though they eluded our guys, Sikhosana recognised them and so went with the police to the poacher's village, where the police made the arrest. The snares set, had come from a phone line, which had fallen down. We had reported this to the phone company some weeks before, stating that unless the line was cleared up, poachers would use it. Our prediction was correct and now we insisted on the phone company joining us to clear up the wire, happily they did so and no animals were killed or even injured thanks to the vigilance and professionalism of our APU.

With our Children's Bush Camp fully operational, hosting two more local schools, and our Arts & Craft Programme continuing to expand under Wendy Blakeley's guidance, PDC is pushing ahead strongly. Our multi faceted conservation programme delivering on its commitments to the local peoples, wildlife and international supporters like never before.

**July 2006:** Glorious dogging days at the beginning of July have ended with tragedy.

After Jealous and I located the den of our Umtchibi pack, we had been waiting patiently for the day when the pups were old enough to venture from the den itself and so allow us the privilege of watching their boisterous antics. Prior to this eventful day we enjoyed so many moments with the adults and yearlings entertaining us with their own playful behaviour. Following them on countless hunting forays and watching with intense concentration as they returned to the den, disappearing into the thick bush, to feed the hungry alpha female, named Mango and the yearling "babysitter" named Amber. It was by watching this behaviour with such intensity that I was happy with my decision on exactly where the den actually was, though we had still not seen it.



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I calculated the days and knew that the pups must be at least 5 weeks old, old enough to be leaving the security of the den and playing in close proximity to it. My decision made, I drove in, slowly, slowly edging towards a point that I calculated would bring me approximately 30 metres from the mouth of the den. This was a distance, which Greg and I new was a “comfortable space” for the dogs. Any closer and they would be agitated to the point of abandoning the den. It was an entirely different matter if the dogs or pups approached us.

I pushed the landrover through the thick bush, smiling at the concern Jealous would have been expressing over the tyres and the inevitable punctures. Sure enough, three punctures in 24 hours hours!! But it was worth it. In the company of two dedicated dog watcher's, who had a combined 38 years of safari excursions in Africa, all aimed at seeing dogs, we arrived at my pre selected point and saw the den for the first time. A single hole, which is unusual and which would ultimately prove to be catastrophic.

The pack of nine were all lying in various positions around the den, encircling it at a distance ranging from a metre or so up to twenty-five metres. They hardly bothered to lift a head, recognising for sure that it was “us” and thus no threat. Mango walked towards us, stopping just a couple of metres from the landrover, perhaps to make sure that we really were no threat. Satisfied, she slowly turned and walked back to the mouth of the den and called the pups out with a familiar, soft, low whine.

Six, maybe seven, perhaps eight, balls of fluff scrambled out of the hole. Running on legs too short for their pot bellies, uncoordinated, clumsy and comical. The yearlings all rushed to the den and lay down, squirming with absolute pleasure as the pups climbed all over them. My companions “unlucky 38 year streak” had certainly been broken. Eventually we agreed that it was six pups.

A week went by, with the pups growing in size, confidence and coordination before our eyes. Apparently full of joy at the prospects of life ahead, their characters developing already, “Spot” showing himself as a potential alpha male, more adventurous than the others he always ventured the furthest and was always the last to go back into the den.

And then the lions came.

Our colleagues from the Hwange Lion Research Project had told us that the dog's den was in the centre of the biggest pride of lions they studied. Eleven lions, formed from adult females, sub adult males, juveniles and one magnificent black manned male, making twelve in total.

Our joy was shattered by a phone call. A local guide had rushed to the nearest phone having witnessed the lion's attack. Jealous and I dropped everything and rushed to the scene, stopping briefly to talk to the guide and get his story.

The lions had been seen at a waterhole just 1km from the dog's den, he knew that trouble was ahead and watched helplessly as the lions moved deliberately towards the den. Obscured from view by the thick bush “all hell broke loose” furious growling, alarm barks from the dogs, it was pandemonium. Dogs ran in all directions and exploded out onto the near by dusty road. Now in full view, the lions chased the dogs, an adult lioness caught “Beans”, however before she could inflict the killing bite, the rest of the dogs attacked her without fear, biting her vulnerable behind and so driving her off their precious pack mate. “Beans” came to his feet, shaking his head as if to clear the daze and then threw himself back into the fray. Dogs chased lions, lions chased dogs, a stand off resulted until the lions finally melted away into the bush. Too nervous to approach the den the dogs also moved into the shade of the thick bush and waited.



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That was the scene that greeted Jealous and I. With our hearts in our mouths we drove slowly through the bush towards the den, vultures sat in the trees all around us. Two lionesses and a sub adult male lay near the den, but moved away quickly as our vehicle approached, we followed them through the bush as best we could, "pushing" them further and further away from the den, not even Jealous was concerned about our tyres this time. Returning to the den we sat and waited for signs of life. Eventually, as the sun set behind us, the pack moved cautiously towards the den site, nervously scrutinising the bush around them with each fearful step, we wished that we could have communicated somehow, letting them know that the lions had gone. As the pack searched the bush, Mango and her alpha male, Pita, approached the den and called softly. Three pups came scrambling out, we waited for more, but they didn't come. Mango dug at the den, maybe it had collapsed a bit and some were trapped, we hoped and waited but the other three did not show.

Jealous and I drove a short distance away and waited through the night, listening to the hypnotic "beep" from "Beans" collar, we wondered if his collar had saved his life by protecting his throat. Early in the morning, as the full moon reached its zenith, the pack moved away, abandoning the den to set up a new one some 500 metres away.

We had seen the three surviving pups clearly the night before and new that "Spots" life full of promise, had ended in a lions jaws. Jealous and I inspected the den site and found the remains of his tiny body, if he had died where he lay, he was too far from the safety of the den, which only had one entrance hole.

**August 2006:** Lions have continued to torment our embattled Umtchibi pack.

After last month's horrific incident, the pack moved their den some 500 metres away, taking their three surviving pups deeper into the teak woodland. However this was not enough, on three more occasions, the lions came back and hunted them down, forcing the pack to move again and again.

As a result of this we have lost contact with them, as they moved even further away from the nearest road each time. We know that the adults are okay, Jealous has done a wonderful job in trying to track them down and was rewarded recently with the sight of all nine adults hunting down a kudu.

However he knew that seeing all nine adults was not necessarily a good thing as it meant that any surviving pups were alone at the den, at the mercy of the lions. We speculated on the chances of any pups still being alive, I urged Jealous to stick to his task and keep track of the pack, if they went back towards the denning area, we could console ourselves with the belief that some pups remained alive.

Over the next view days, Jealous proved just how good he is at tracking the dogs, how well he has learnt his lessons. He kept with them, following as they returned from several hunting forays, always going back towards the denning area. Unfortunately losing the signal eventually as the pack move away from the nearby road, deep into the teak woodland. However, we are able to console our selves that some pups must be alive, otherwise the pack would have moved away from the area all together by now.

We will just have to wait a few more weeks for the chance of seeing "Spots" surviving siblings, when they eventually leave the den for good to start out on the next chapter in an already too eventful life.



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Jealous also proved his worth, as if that were necessary, by finding the den of our Mashombo pack. A small pack consisting of the alpha pair and two survivors from their 2005 litter. This year they have six pups, who all seem very fit and well fed.

Their den is outside Hwange National Park, where lion pressure is less, however elephant pressure is immense!! Never an easy time for the dogs.

On one morning Jealous sat watching the pups as a herd he described as "too many to count" moved through the bush all around the den, breaking trees as they went, reacting aggressively to the smell of the dogs', forcing the adults to run away and the pups to run for cover.

Jealous couldn't tell if the pups had made it, such was the commotion and dust kicked up.

Once the calm resumed, he waited for the adults to come back to the den and breathed a sigh of relief when all six pups came boiling out of their hole in the ground. Needless to say, the pack moved the den and so we were again frustrated by the road network that has prevented us from locating the new den site. Jealous is able to follow the pack when they hunt only to lose the signal when they head back for the den as it is too far from the nearest road. Again we have no choice but to wait for the day when the pack leave the den and resume their nomadic lifestyle.

This daily monitoring of our study packs dovetails with our anti poaching unit deployment, which obviously pay particular attention to the areas that these packs hunt in. This month they again arrested poachers, after sitting in ambush for two days following the discovery of a freshly set snare line.

**September 2006:** September saw our two local study packs, the Mashambo and the Umtshibi, resume their nomadic life style. After so many trials and tribulations surrounding their denning period, it is kind of a relief that that vulnerable phase in their lives is over, however they have now ventured into an even more vulnerable phase, if that is at all possible.

Certainly that is the case for the pups. The den is, on the whole, a relatively safe haven for the pups, however the Umtshibi in particular have had a very difficult time of it during the last couple of months and we have documented similar difficulties for other packs over the years. The post denning period is however the most difficult time for the pups, as they do not have the safe bolt hole of a den to hide in when danger threatens and of course are still unable to keep up with the adults, when they go hunting. If the pack is large enough, they can afford to leave a "pup guarder" behind when they hunt.

Often a yearling pack member, this dog's task is to keep a watchful eye on the playful pups, and then lead them to the pack once a kill has been made. The Umtshibi do have enough adults / yearlings and seem to be coping so far.

Whenever Jealous finds them, they are leaving a yearling with the three surviving pups, more often than not, it is the pretty female we named Amber, who has this task. Jealous always has the tough decision to make of either staying with the pup guard and the pups or following the rest of the pack on the hunt.

The Mashambo are a much smaller pack and the difficult decision making they experience is frequently evident. So many times the four "adults" (actually two adults and two yearlings) go hunting, leaving the six pups alone, only for one of the yearlings to come back to the pups, clearly agitated.



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Jealous has acted as guardian angel on more than one occasion already, waiting with the pups, only too aware of the close proximity of a lion pride. That particular situation passed without any drama. The adults came back from a successful hunt and lead the pups away, as Jealous breathed a sigh of relief.

Our APU set up an ambush some 20km inside Hwange National Park, an operation that signifies a new phase in our ongoing battle to eliminate the significant threat presented by poaching. Never before have they uncovered a poacher's camp so far inside the park, way past their normal area of operation. After waiting in ambush for several days for the poachers to return, they removed over 70 snares, which were set in the nearby bush and the remains of several animals before destroying the camp.

Following the school holidays, our Children's Bush Camp resumed in September with the annual visit from the Harare international School, the school that pioneered our "Donor Schools".

Our "Donor School" programme aims to attract schools that can pay for the cost of their camp and make an additional donation that covers the camp of one of the targeted schools in our region.

Towards the end of September we welcomed Main Camp School to the Bush Camp, thus completing a very positive month for three of the key aspects of PDC.

**October 2006:** October was highlighted by the release of the 16 dogs we translocated from South Africa earlier this year. After spending almost 5 months in our rehabilitation facility, a process aimed at acclimatising the dogs to their new life in Hwange, we determined that it was time to release them. Careful consideration was given to the release options and it was agreed that we would select the option that was the least stressful for the dogs, so we simply opened the gate to our rehabilitation facility. Xmas had been conditioning the dogs for several weeks prior to the release, not only increasing the amount of food they received but also placing the food right next to the release gate.

We started early on the chosen day. Xmas carried meat around to the release gate, as the dog's excitement grew. This time however he placed the meat outside of the gate and tied it to a tree, the idea being to coax the dogs through the gate with their morning meal. We really had no idea what to expect and were delighted when the dogs rushed down to the gate, hesitating only momentarily before rushing through it to feed on the carcass provided for them. The food was their main concern and only after it was consumed did they begin to explore their new surroundings. At this point we wondered if they actually realised that they were "outside". Having spent almost two years inside various enclosures, they probably did not realise that they were now free to explore the 15,000 plus square kilometres of Hwange National Park. It was a very poignant moment for all of us.

The dogs moved further and further away, with Jealous, of course, following them. What did surprise us even more was that the pack soon split. 9 dogs headed in one direction, 3 in another and 4 returned to the carcass.

As this situation unfolded over the next few days, it added more weight to our belief that the "pack" was in fact 16 dogs. Prior to collecting them we had heard about them fighting while in the enclosure in South Africa, which resulted in several of the "original" 23 being killed, hence we ended up with 16 dogs and a bit of a mystery.



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The four dogs remained near our rehab and in fact walked back in side when Xmas prepared food for our "resident" pack of John, Angela, Ulaka and Londolozzi. We will now work at integrating these four in with our residents, creating a bigger pack for the next proposed release onto Starvation Island next year.

Jealous followed the 9 who moved east, as we anticipated, towards what we considered as a vacant territory. The other 3 moved south. Without our ultralight we knew we would struggle to keep a close eye on the pack, the fact that they split made this even more difficult, but Jealous is out every day searching for and following them.

Obviously with all this new dog activity, we were very interested to see how our local packs (Mashambo and Umtchibi) would behave. The Mashambo have a territory that brings them to our rehabilitation centre on a regular basis, but for now they have remained near Main Camp, showing no obvious sign of concern or awareness of the released dogs. Again, this is as we expected, believing that the released dogs would quickly move out of the area to look for their own territory, if they were not going to join forces with the local packs. So the Mashambo, with four surviving pups out of their June litter of 6 seem content for now. It will be interesting to see if they do join forces, which would be beneficial for all concerned. The released dogs obviously boosting the pack size, while the Mashambo dogs would provide the "local knowledge".

The Umtchibi pack is further south, so we do not expect any reaction from them. Already a strong pack of 9, we would presume that they are not interested in any new pack mates. They have surprised us, or perhaps disappointed us, with only 2 pups surviving so far from their litter of 6. I reported on the lions killing 3 pups earlier in the year, but to loose another is disappointing, with so many adults available to keep an eye on the vulnerable pups.

Obviously we will keep as close a watch on the situation as we can.

Though all this dog activity grabs headlines, our Children's Bush camp continued its wonderful work, hosting another three local schools on our Free of Charge programme and our APU continued with their life saving work.

**November 2006:** Jealous has had his work cut, following the release of the 16 dogs from Pilansberg last month. As reported, the 16 dogs split, with 4 of them returning to our rehabilitation facility, so Jealous had four packs to follow, namely, the Umtchibi, the Mashambo, the Pilansberg 9 and the Pilansberg 3.

However what followed caught us all by surprise.

Jealous became concerned when he caught up with the Mashambo, picking up the signal from the alpha male, who is the only collared dog in that pack. To his surprise, the male was on his own with the 4 pups. They all looked fit and well, but there was no sign of the 3 females, the other adults in the pack. He stayed with the Mashambo all day and night, before reaching the conclusion that the 3 females were missing.

The following day, 10 Pilansberg dogs turned up at our rehab accompanied by the 3 Mashambo females!! The Mashambo male was not far away and was clearly aware of the situation. His loyalties lay with his 4 pups and he moved away to join them. We were astonished by this development and could only sit and watch the situation unfold.



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The Pilansberg dogs were obviously of a very distinct genealogy from the dogs in Hwange NP, so we concluded that the Mashambo females somehow knew this and the attraction was great enough to cause them to abandon their pups. Shocking as this was, we could not intervene, though our priority was to keep a very watchful eye on the Mashambo male and his pups.

For four days this situation remained the same. The Pilansberg / Mashambo combination stayed close to our rehab, while the Mashambo male stayed with his pups. Then the Pilansberg dogs moved away, leaving the Mashambo females behind.

Our experience has shown us that, in general, females choose the males, so again we concluded that the Mashambo alpha female had decided that none of the Pilansberg males were as good as her current alpha male, however she did not rejoin the Mashambo male, nor did the other 2 females. All 3 of them remained by our rehab for over a week, despite the fact that the Mashambo male and his pups were not far away. They showed no sign of looking for each other and our confusion was complete!!

The Pilansberg males moved east and were seen hunting a kudu. The report stated that 2 of the dogs were limping and that lions were in the area, so Jealous temporarily abandoned his vigil over the Mashambo male and pups and went to locate the Pilansberg dogs. He found them quite easily and stayed with them for a day, concerned that the 2 limping ones were not staying with the other 8. He went back to check on the 2 and discovered that they had been killed by the lions. The surviving 8 moved further east, where they remain to this day.

Happily, the Mashambo pack was soon reunited without any apparent fuss or concern? Today they provide us with a lot of pleasure, as their daily wanderings frequently cause our paths to cross and the four pups continue to grow before our eyes.

Once this status quo returned, Jealous was able to extend his search for the Umtchibi pack, which had been a bit neglected with the Pilansberg / Mashambo show taking centre stage. When he finally caught up with the Umtchibi he was disappointed to see that only one pup remained. We can only speculate about the fate of the Umtchibi pups and will never understand why the pack has had such a poor year in terms of its pup survivorship.

**Project Update December 2006:** Another remarkable year for Painted Dog Conservation has come to a close with the successful collaring of two dogs from our embattled Umtchibi pack. Despite the fact that our "local" Mashambo pack visit our Rehab facility almost every day, I had been frustrated in my efforts to collar at least one other dog in this pack, so I turned my attention to the Umtchibi pack.

We had not received any sighting of the Umtchibi pack for some days so I had no reference point to begin the search. However, experience told me that at this time of year, the dogs tend to focus quite a bit of attention on the new born impala foals and I knew of three places within the packs home range that had relatively high impala densities. Jealous was still on his annual leave, so I didn't have anyone to discuss my theory with, smiling to my self, I headed for these locations anyway, knowing he probably would have agreed with me!!

Luck was on my side and I soon picked up the signal from the collar on the alpha male, Pita. The pack were resting adjacent to the air field at Hwange Main Camp, so not the most strenuous of searches, I smiled again, as I thought of the hours Jealous has put in recently in an effort to keep track of the various study packs. The dogs were resting under a thick bush making it hard for me to get a good head count. My concern for the pack was already raised, as I could not detect a signal from Beans, the other collared dog in the pack. After a short time the dogs began to



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emerge from the bush, characteristically stretching seemingly stiff limbs and spines, yawning to reveal gleaming teeth. Hunting clearly on their minds. Alpha male Pita plus four yearlings followed alpha female Mango. Only six dogs!! No puppies!! Beans was missing, as was Amber, the Beta female. All six looked very, very thin and the impala herd only 300 metres away presented an immediate focus for their hunting ambitions. I watched in disbelief as a shamble of a hunt unfolded. Dogs running in all directions as the impala "bomb shelled". Only Pita seemed to have a real focus and he quickly caught a two month old foal. Hardly enough for him, let alone six hungry dogs. As the light faded, they made another half-hearted attempt to catch the now vigilant impala and again failed miserably. Hardly the kind of hunting that the dogs' formidable reputation is built upon! A herd of zebra added insult to injury by chasing the dogs away from the open grassland. I drove home, sure that the pack would not be far away in the morning.

Project events over took me in the morning, as is often the case these days, and so it was late morning before I was able to catch up with the pack, which had only moved past the far end of the airfield. I drove up to them and was happy to see that they had clearly fed well, keeping the species hunting reputation in tact, just!

I loaded a dart into our new Daninject rifle and edged closer to the resting pack. I hoped to collar the alpha female, Mango, who happily obliged by being the first to stand up. She walked a few metres away then stopped, side onto the landrover, thus presenting me with a relatively simple shot. She jumped slightly as the dart went home, and then calmly walked away to lie down under another bush.

I loaded another dart while keeping an eye on her as the drugs took effect. This opportunity was too good to miss and I focussed my attention on one of the other males, who had a wound on his shoulder. He also obliged by presenting me with a fairly straightforward darting opportunity. I thought about how weird this was without Jealous by my side, however both dogs were soon under the influence of the anaesthetic and so needed all my attention.

I drove a few metres into the bush and stopped near Mango. Placing a blanket on the ground under thick shade before gently picking her up and placing her on it. I quickly checked her vital signs, happy that she was very stable; I walked over and picked up the male, then carried him back and placed him on the same blanket before checking his vital signs. All was well, so I proceeded to fit a collar to each dog. I was able to relax once this was done and I had taken the vital samples for Greg's DNA analysis work. I sat in the shade with the dogs, checking their vital signs, watching a herd of zebra, while waiting for a sign that the anaesthetic was wearing off.

The welfare of the darted animal, usually a dog in our case of course, is paramount. Greg's protocol is very clear in that we only dart a dog, for the purpose of collaring, in the morning, never in the evening. The main reason for this is to allow for plenty of recovery time before the more powerful nocturnal predators are at large and so the dogs need their wits about them. Mango and the male started to wake up, so I gave both of them the final reversal injection and moved back to my landrover, happy that there was still plenty of daylight hours left for them to fully recover. Both soon started to stand on wobbly legs and staggered a few metres away in typically "drunken" style, still some time away from regaining full coordination.

The staggering dogs attracted the attention of the grazing zebras, which moved closer. The dogs lay down again, seemingly unaware of the approaching herd and I watched in amazement as the zebra moved closer and closer. Now there was no doubt in my mind that the zebra were intending to drive the dogs away as they had done the evening before, only this time, these two dogs at least, were in no fit state to respond to the threat. Not much in the darting protocol about this, I thought, as I climbed out of the landrover, expecting that my sudden appearance would halt



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the zebra in their tracks. No such luck. The zebra completely ignored me, their attention locked on the two dogs. I ran towards the zebra waving a towel above my head!! Now they saw me and of course stopped their "assault" on the dogs. I walked quickly back to the landrover, past the two dogs, who did not even lift a head in concern. I now had time to drive the landrover around the expanse of broken ground, which was between the zebra herd and me, and completed the job of "pushing" them well away from the dogs. This done, I returned to the dogs and waited for them to recover fully, reflecting on yet another day less ordinary.