



# wild dogs re-wilded

*Africa Geographic* founder **Peter Borchert** visited the Limpopo-Lipadi Game and Wilderness Reserve in south-eastern Botswana where a conservation highlight has been the successful re-introduction of African wild dogs. Here he meets the dogs and chats to **Jacquie Symons**, who led the re-introduction team.

**‘CLICK ... CLICK ... CLICK’** POPS THE radio receiver faintly as Jacquie Symons manipulates the aerial from the window of our vehicle. Then silence – we’ve lost them. A bit further and the reassuring clicks return, still faint but there. ‘We’re heading right to them now,’ Symons calls confidently and on cue the signal gathers speed and intensity.

Suddenly we’re upon them, two African wild dogs resting under a bush. One after another a few more raise their heads until we can make out eight in total.

It’s a rare privilege to see wild dogs in the bush as these beautifully patterned canids are having a thin time of it. Once found throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa,

they’re down to between 3 000 and 5 500 in number, according to the *IUCN Red Data Book*, and these are mostly in southern Africa and southern East Africa. So any effort to conserve the remaining packs is to be lauded, especially in the case of Limpopo-Lipadi where the intention is to re-establish the predators on the reserve.

‘The project began in 2008,’ explains Symons, ‘when Cheetah Conservation Botswana asked if we could try to raise nine orphaned puppies that had been dug out of their den. It wasn’t long before I was on my way to Mokolodi Game Reserve, just outside Gaborone, to fetch them.’

The pups spent the first few months in a holding pen beefing up on impala meat while Symons and her team beefed up on captive breeding. In many respects they were in

ABOVE Two Spots (collared), the alpha female of Limpopo-Lipadi’s main wild dog pack, with her seven pups.

LEFT Adults in the pack play with pups. They had recently killed an impala and were heading to a waterhole to drink and wash, but paused along the way for a brief exercise in bonding.

OPPOSITE At the waterhole, one of the adult males continues the game as he charges through the water.



unknown territory – trying to raise wild dog puppies without an adult alpha pair, other grown dogs or adolescents was a challenge to say the least. Preventing habituation to people and teaching the pups to hunt would be just two of the hurdles they faced.

By the end of 2008 it was time to take the next step – to release the rapidly growing pups into a larger, electrified enclosure. To avoid unnecessary contact, an improvised pulley system was used to feed them. ‘We gave them everything to try,’ says Symons. ‘Wildebess, ostrich, steenbok, guineafowl... The only thing they refused was waterbuck.’ At first the dogs viewed the feeding contraption with great suspicion, but innate curiosity and appetite soon overcame their reservations.

While we’re chatting the wild dogs get to their feet and start milling about with much sniffing and nuzzling as they chitter away in that strange, almost bird-like language of theirs. A rancid waft comes to us on the gentle breeze – up close, wild dogs don’t smell too good to human noses! We can also see from the blood around their chops that it hasn’t been long since a successful hunt. ‘We actually had to teach them to catch prey,’ recalls Symons. ‘But that’s another story.’

Towards the end of May 2009, with the dogs well on their way to adulthood, the programme had its first major setback. During a routine vaccination session the dominant female, named Black Belly, suddenly stopped breathing. Lipadi’s vet Erik Verreyne did everything he could to revive her but to no avail. ‘We were stunned,’ says Symons quietly. ‘The post-mortem revealed an underlying pneumonia that probably caused a bronchial spasm.’

But life carries on and once Black Belly’s sisters realised she wasn’t coming back an individual given the name of Two Spots took her place as the new alpha female. With Two Spots leading the young pack, the project progressed steadily and there were no further losses.

The dogs were growing apace and it was obvious that some diversity would have to be introduced if a viable pack was to be formed. The young males were swapped for two large males, Lekona and Mathebole, which had wandered down from the Mashatu Game Reserve and been caught in an antelope enclosure at Swartwater, South Africa. There were some minor skirmishes as the new relationships were tested, but Two Spots’ status as the top female was secure and Lekona soon emerged as the dominant male. He took an immediate shine not to Two Spots but to Back Hook, a sub-dominant female, and it became obvious that they would mate.



MAGNUS HIRD/LIMPOPO-LIPADI (3)

**T**hen came the Big Day. On 1 May 2010 the gate to the holding enclosure was opened and the Lipadi pack had the run of the reserve. ‘It was an emotionally charged moment,’ Symons admits. ‘The females were soon out and exploring their new horizons. Not the boys though – they were very reluctant.’ Eventually they were cajoled out and after 21 long months, Limpopo-Lipadi’s first pack of wild dogs disappeared into the bush to live by their instinct and wits.

The dramas were far from over, though, as Symons and her field team followed the pack’s fortunes over the ensuing months. A highlight was the birth of Back Hook’s litter, and a collective sigh of relief rippled through the team when it became clear that Two Spots, still the alpha female, would accept the pups. A few weeks later one of the other females, Flash, gave birth, but her litter disappeared without trace, either abandoned or killed.

Then reports of unidentified males – five in all – began to filter in, and their arrival in the reserve would dramatically alter the social dynamics of the Limpopo-Lipadi wild dogs. The newcomers chased off Lekona and Mathebole (who retired with one of the pups to the eastern part of the reserve) and formed a liaison with Two Spots in the western sector.

It is this grouping of Two Spots and the invaders-turned-settlers that we are now watching. We follow them as they set off to drink before Jacquie packs away her tracking equipment and we leave them in peace. **AG**

## From strength to strength...

Since my visit, the team at Limpopo-Lipadi has been sending me regular updates on the welfare of the wild dogs.

**February 2011** The search is on for a new home for the ousted Lekona, Mathebole and the pup (also a male). At some stage they will have to leave the reserve to find a female.

**May 2011** Two Spots has had her first litter. The five males, especially the alpha dog, are very protective of the den site; warning growls can be heard whenever humans approach.

**June 2011** The two males and pup found their own way off the reserve and, amazingly, have met up with a female from their original pack. She happens to be pregnant and has denned on a nearby property. We’re hoping this will start a new chapter in their story.

**August 2011** There are seven healthy pups from Two Spots’ first litter. The pack has left the den and is moving across the reserve and hunting successfully.

**December 2011** After two fruitless attempts to locate and dart the wild dogs, it was third time lucky – we successfully put a tracking collar on one of the males and replaced the alpha female’s collar.