



Lion Dog Digest

Sponsored by the
Rhodesian Ridgeback International Foundation

The previous issue of this Digest, November 2002, dealt in the main with the catastrophic circumstances suffered by the farmers of Zimbabwe and their dogs. We all know that our Ridgies are supposed to function excellently under fire, but the lifestyle of a farmer in Zims is one of constant and brutal intimidation and suppression. This is not exactly the same as in South Africa where farmers and their family members are wantonly murdered at the rate of 15 per month.

The original content of the previous issue's story was to highlight yet another breeder, Umvutcha, of our magnificent dogs; but it simply grew and grew while the country disintegrated. However the story did not end there, and we return to it again even if it still doesn't fit the normal pattern of our LDD's content.

The Umvutcha Homestead



On another matter altogether we give full-page coverage to the best picture ever to come this way depicting how the modern Ridgeback deals with animals in the wild. We tend to boast about our dogs and their remarkable capabilities. Really, they must be as competent as they ever were, but nowadays we do not permit them to put their teeth on another animal.

Just as an example, we happen to have one young fellow who has taken a severe aversion to hyena, to such an extent that he not only chases them off, but gives them a few nips to speed them on their way. This behaviour is totally unacceptable. The strongest measures will be taken against him to stop this fun-game even if only in the interest of the hyena, and heaven knows that particular animal should need no protection whatsoever from our 'little brown dogs'.

But returning to that picture, it is not about a Rhodesian Ridgeback facing some antelope. No, not at all. This chappie is staring out an elephant, the largest animal in the world that he can meet up with. It would be perfectly acceptable for everyone to maintain that such an act is outrageously impossible, for what can the already described 'little brown dog' do to an elephant, and therefore how can he represent any form of a threat to the mighty pachyderm. Well obviously, he does not in fact represent any threat whatsoever. Oh, maybe he could grab that ellie's trunk and give it a hefty bite, but the ellie would swing his trunk about, perhaps in the direction of a nearby tree, and we would be left with mincemeat and bone-meal instead of our foolish dog. I think we can safely assume that our doggy would not be so stupid. So we accept that he can represent no threat at all to the elephant. But, on the other hand, does the elephant represent any form of threat to the dog? And here one must say 'No' yet again.

Brute power is of paramount importance in nature, and the sheer size of an elephant guarantees him pride of place among all other animals. But what happens when he meets up with one which has the courage not to run before the awe-inspiring bulk of the mighty elephant. Well, in the event, the latter stopped, stood still, and considered his position.

In the picture you may detect that there is another member of the species right behind the one fully in the picture frame. They all had to come to a full stop while the whole matter was assessed according to the etiquette of the bush. As it happened, once the big grey one had halted, our little Ridgeback decided that he had done his duty and backed off.

So the camera lens caught that moment when the two of them eye-balled each other in a state which can best be described as "relaxed, mutual, armed neutrality". The elephant already knew that the unusual little animal before him was not afraid and had no intention of making space for the very much larger 'enemy'. They both knew that neither bore evil intent towards the other, but they both also knew equally well that each must be prepared to withstand a full-out attack from the other. This is the point at which things start to become very interesting.

The above scenario, as already mentioned, developed along the lines that the dog prudently withdrew. But what happens if his human master, at this stage, tells him rather to stand his ground.

The next move, on the elephant's part, is to mock charge the offending obstructor. The etiquette of the wild requires that the obstructor thereupon gives way, and any self-respecting lion for example would certainly yield under these circumstances. But what would happen if the dog is instructed to stand his ground or, more provocatively to advance on the opposition. This creates a need for a total reappraisal by the elephant as he is not accustomed to resistance in this form. He has already detected the total lack of fear in his obstructor, as can be seen in the picture for example.

Whether the elephant engages in the normal tactic of mock charging at this stage or not is purely of academic interest if the obstructor takes the initiative and advances. The elephant is now faced with an approaching unafraid opponent, bolstered by a human in the background, and this is a scenario he really doesn't comprehend. The dog holds the whip hand, the elephant doesn't take a chance on the non-assessable risk of injury, and he backs off accordingly. And so you are at stage one of the Ridgeback's ability to herd an elephant. Once they are moving all you must do is to keep them moving, and in the correct direction also. The first hurdle has always been set the highest, and that was how do you get them going.

Let us now look at the practical advantages of this manoeuvre. Firstly, let us not take seriously YT's

newly developed desire to have our RR's employed to herd hundreds of elephant several hundred kilometres from their favourite stamping grounds into the unknown pleasures of the international game parks of Mozambique. Let us rather dwell on more routine problems at the Kruger National Park, for example, where the elephant breakout through the fences and lay waste to large tracts of farming lands, whether they carry mealies or cane.

This is what prompted Dusty to be brought in by Ralph Kalwa about six years ago, though Ralf's interest was only in having the company of the dog during these really trying nights out in the open with who knows what else for company. Ralph was not particularly taken by the herding idea, we must point out.



Blockage in the making



Moving into position

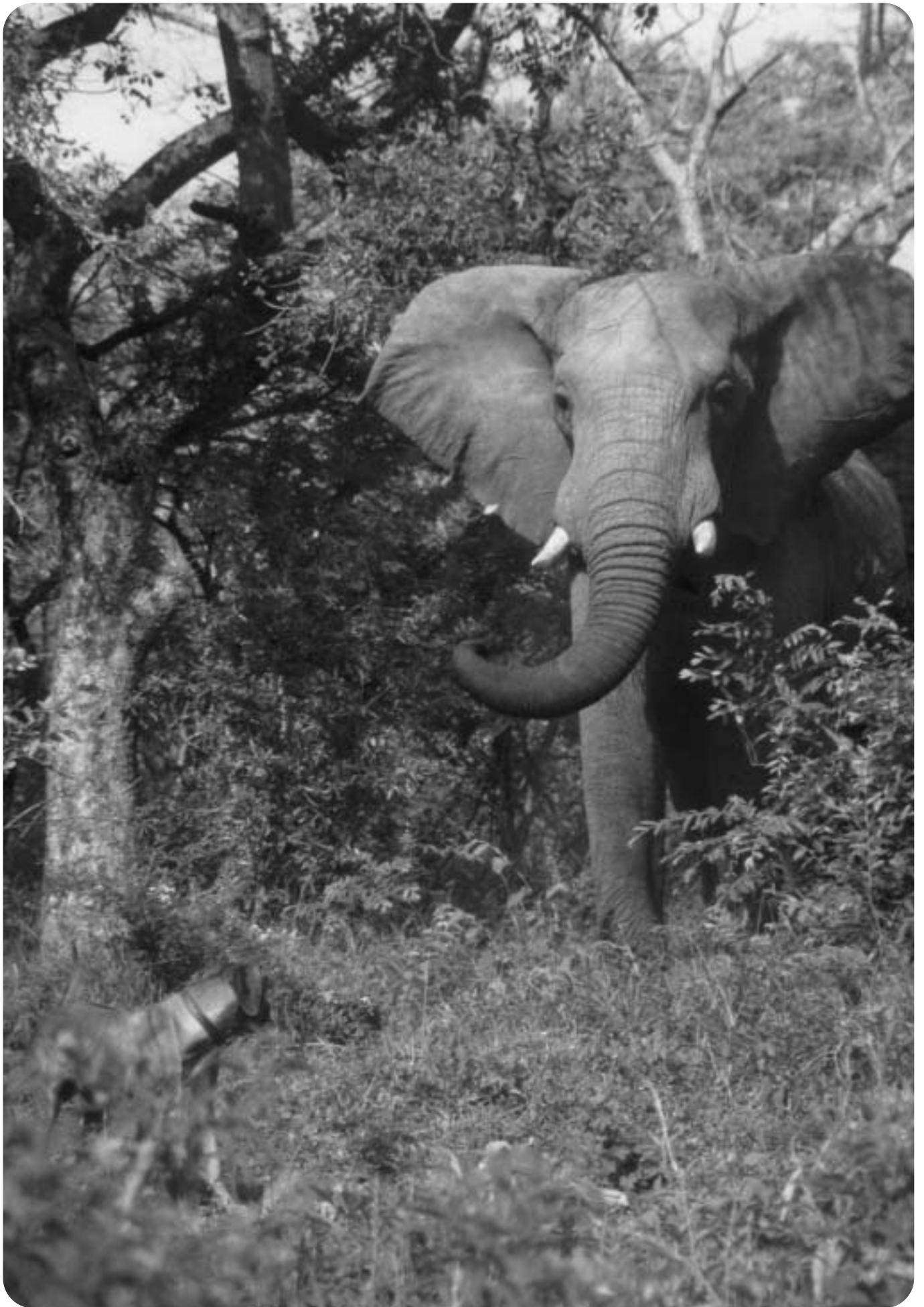
Then there is the other routine problem where an elephant, usually an older one in musthe, takes up a position in the road and creates a traffic jam. This latter problem has been faced by YT even if he was the only car around for quite some time.

Take my word for it, when that big chap at the side of the road comes into view you do not think of 'friendly hitch-hiker', but reduce speed rapidly and look for escape routes. There was no alternative but to slow right down and slide over to the left. That was when he decided to stroll more noticeably in to the road forcing me to move further across to the left, eventually coming to a complete halt. He would move backwards off the road, but returned to it immediately I tried to move forwards. We played at this back and forth game a few times until another car came onto the scene on the far side. He decided to stop very far away but he did seem to distract the big fellow for long enough for me to nip past and get on my way.

So let us hope that a way will be found to make use of our dogs in these two spheres. The Ridgeback can certainly do the job. In the case of elephant in the road causing an obstruction, there is no need to move the pachyderm more than say 25m, just enough to get him clear off the road. Then retrieving them from the cane fields is usually a matter of having them facing back home i.e. facing in the right direction, and then getting them to move, 'move' being the operative word. We need to get this young fellow into the KNP, get more exposure/training, and to show them just how valuable and useful he can be.

What we show on page four is a black and white version of the dog and elephant encounter. If you receive your copy of the LDD by snail mail, that 'printing' is via a photocopying machine which seldom does justice to the original.

If you want the picture, in colour, please e-mail me at <scotty@stewart.org.za> and the jpg file can be sent very easily. The original picture is approximately A4 size and was scanned at 300dpi. This results in a file of 1.8Mb when transmitted which might be awkward for some computer facilities. It is also available in a skilfully compressed 150dpi version which the fundi who created it believes would be equally good on the screen and would only come to 1.4Mb transmitted. The choice is yours.



ZIMBABWE

While visiting the UK I had the opportunity to call in on John Sankey (Umvutcha) while he spent a few weeks with his younger brother at Bishop's Tachbrooke, sort of near Warwick which isn't far from Birmingham. That was on 20 May and I was very glad to see that he looked so well. But the loss of his wife after the loss of the farm had inevitably taken its terrible toll. He finally gave up the battle against illness on Thursday, 3 July 2003. The funeral was on Monday, 7 July, and again, as with Margie half a year earlier, the church was very full of those who wanted to pay their last respects.

The service was pleasant and comprehensive, with the minister including reference to the current situation. The picture given was strong, but he didn't dwell on the disastrous circumstances currently throttling a once prosperous country, which until so recently could hold up its head in the world of nations.

During the preceding month John's son David (from Perth Australia) had been constantly at his side. They had obviously handled many matters, and of the original approximately 15 Rhodesian Ridgebacks only six were still hemmed in within the large garden at 22A Lawley Road, Suburbs, Bulawayo. What a dramatic change of lifestyle they had endured, from the wide-open spaces of Thandanani Farm to the restrictions of city suburban life. One could only say that their living environment had changed, not that they had adjusted to it.

On the day following the service, Tuesday, John's older brother Charles and I followed up several contacts and arranged placement of the two males and one of the females.



The remaining three females were to be brought down to Johannesburg on the understanding that if there were any problems re-homing them that they would be returned to Bulawayo. In the dark, on Wednesday morning, Charles and I loaded them up with the assistance of two very able friends of the late John Sankey, Harry Wray and Marie.

We set off for Plumtree with all speed because we knew that we had a very long day ahead of us. We had the Movement Permits for the dogs but that would not guarantee smooth progress. There were several

veterinary check-points en route, and we had the F and M Control to pass through at Ramokowebana when entering Botswana. Before that though the sun rose and the dogs spent much of the time sitting up and staring out the windows. We sped past the Eskdale Farm and only one dog looked in its direction. So the Ridgebacks left behind them the place where it had all begun, Figtree, the Hope Mission Station, and Plumtree. One could only dwell on the likelihood that, with the closure of the Umvutcha Kennels there would be no further breeding of the Registered Rhodesian Ridgeback where Cornelius van Rooyen had started it up less than 125 years earlier.



The trip to Johannesburg was pretty uneventful. The prospect of letting them out during the almost 1 000km journey had caused YT much concern because two people with the three RR's and one Bakkie (pick up) plus canopy didn't make for simply organised physiological breaks. So the decision was taken to make only one stop en route for a brief leg-stretch etc. and to provide no food and minimum water during the whole journey. The weather was wonderfully cool and the three settled down very comfortably on the mattress. The side windows on the canopy were kept closed and the back door locked. By means of the double windows between the canopy and the cab we could control the air-flow into the dog area. Concerns were more centred on not making them too cold rather than making them over-heat, and when we reached our destination the food and water offered was not immediately gulped down, so we had judged it pretty accurately.

Halfway through the trip, having passed through Botswana (that means that all the border crossing procedures were now behind us) we stopped less than 50km into RSA. The fear that YT had suffered about dogs charging off into that Never-Never-Land did not materialise. We found an open gate opening onto a nice bit of bush and trespassed for 20 minutes. The dogs enjoyed it tremendously and taking two of them through the thorn-bushes wasn't at all difficult, except when one picked up thorns or dubbeltjies and foot care was called for. Even loading them up again caused no excitement. There had been visions of trying to get the last one back inside while the other two were forcing their escape. Nothing could have been further from the truth, and this was in spite of a collar breaking and the consequent use of a jury-rigged collar/lead.

They behaved themselves impeccably and when you think of it they were a very varied bunch. The oldest was Bundi, a nine year-old security system all on her own. In contradiction of her reputation she was most affectionate, but she obviously had a taste for petrol pump attendants and anyone who was rude enough to stare through the windows. Then there was the seven-year-old Cobi who, by her gigantic leaps into the air,

convinced everyone that the ages of the two younger bitches had been swapped around; she was unbearably boisterous. The youngest was four-year-old Maggie, the constant companion of John when he single-handedly challenged invasions of up to 150 Border Gezi Youth. She knew what gunfire was all about, the shouting, the mad dashing here and there, the fear that stalked the mealie fields.

Maggie was at this stage very subdued, in fact someone who came to see the dogs was convinced that she was severely sick. The truth was simple; the person to whom she had been a constant, and invariably, sole companion was gone, and the bond had been broken which develops between man and animal when the going is really tough.

It was six in the evening when we arrived at the temporary kennelling facilities. Not yet dark but getting that way. Food and water was put down but the three were more interested in their new surroundings. Now they had to cope with another drastic change in their lives with hopefully only one more dramatic move to come.

Fortunately Ilmarie had offered kenneling facilities which would take the form of temporary holding



With Ilmarie.

pens while the dogs were settled down, vetted thoroughly, and then re-homed. With three dogs of her own and another two with her mother on the adjoining property, it was very much a gathering of the clans. After two days of (regrettably) being spoiled rotten the dogs had changed quite a lot. The whole pack was not allowed to get together but the three were treated as a unit and not broken up at any stage. Whether this was wise or not is an open question, but they had certainly been a pack on the farm at Nyamandhlovu. However, even then there had been divisions. But that was when there had been 15 of them in total. The last six had always been most comfortable in each other's company.

Bundi is becoming increasingly affectionate towards Ilmarie's husband, and the couple must move rapidly to get their butts on a settee or chair before the brown tide takes over. Cobi is not leaping up as dangerously as at the onset, and Maggie has decided that life is really worth living and swaggers about.



Harry, John and Charles.

They will find new lives to enjoy as Ridgies always do. They are flexible, they are adaptable, and they are survivors. But there still remains that overwhelming feeling that the Rhodesian Ridgeback has come to its final end, right where it all began.

JOHN SANKEY



John Sankey died peacefully on 3 July 2003. Mourned by his many friends, he will also be remembered by the farming fraternity as a staunch supporter of the Nyamandlhovu Farmers, and an innovative user of all that auctions could offer when equipping Thandanani Farm as one of the most advanced in the area. He also was a breeder of top quality Rhodesian Ridgebacks under the Umvutcha kennel name. He will be missed by the Foundation for his wisdom and wise words about which Ridgebacks fared best under bush conditions.

John, after all the anxious times during the most recent years, you can now rest peacefully, in safety.

ELEPHANT TRAMPLES BOY

Under the headline “Enraged Elephant Tramples Taunting Youth” Yolande Nel reported in the Citizen of 25 February 2003 as follows: POLOKWANE - A teenage boy died when he was trampled by an elephant in the Hlavekisa trust area on Sunday. Lancelot Mdluli (13), was one of a group of boys who chased the elephant, spokesman for the Mopani Area of the police Captain James Ngoepe said. The elephant bull turned around and stormed the boys, trampling Mdluli, killing him instantly.

An inquest was commissioned and the police are investigating where the elephant came from. According to owner of the Manyeleti Reserve, Christo Pretorius, he was in the Cottenburg settlement where the incident happened. Pretorius said yesterday hundreds of people stormed the animal, “trying to kill it”. The excited crowd traumatised the elephant and it turned around and trampled the boy, he said.

The elephant bull came from the direction of the Kruger National Park and headed back in that direction again, said Du Plessis. He blamed the Limpopo government for the incident, saying that numerous requests had been made during the last two years for the erection of an electric fence between Orpen Gate and Klaserie.

Communications officer for the Limpopo department of finance, Tsotso Schoole, described it as “an unfortunate incident”. She told The Citizen yesterday that when regional co-ordinator of environmental affairs, Bertus Howard, was alerted he immediately dispatched a team of field rangers to drive the animal back but they were too late to prevent the death. Some of the protected areas such as Manyeleti Nature Reserve have electrified fences, she said.

ELEPHANT KILLS RANGER

In a recent issue of the Laevelder JP Celliers reported on how an elephant cow managed to kill a ranger: KOMATIPOORT – A man died last week after an angry elephant cow charged and trampled him. According to police spokesman, Captain Thabisile Gama of Nelspruit SAPS, Mr Laybert Mathebula (38) was on duty at Kwa Madwala Lodge on 3 December at around 17h45 when the incident occurred. Mathebula, a tracker, and a colleague Mr Ruel Ngwenya (28) escorted guests on a game drive when they came upon a herd of elephant.

The bush is terribly dense in this area and the herd could not be clearly seen. The two men decided to approach the herd from downwind in an attempt to persuade the animals to move in the direction of the guests said Ms Rentia van Eyssen, owner of Kwa Madwala. It is alleged that the wind suddenly changed direction and the men were detected by a nearby cow with a three-day-old calf. Reacting instinctively, possibly in an attempt to protect her calf, the cow charged and trampled Mathebula. Police stated that the guests could not see the incident but heard the elephants as they crashed through the bush, trumpeting as they went.

According to the owners of Kwa Madwala Lodge, Mr and Ms Conrad and Rentia van Eyssen, this was a

tragic event and they wished to express their condolences to the family of the deceased. "He was an exceptional tracker and will be sorely missed," said Ms van Eyssen. It is the first time that something of this nature has happened on our land and it serves as a reminder that a wild elephant with a young calf is extremely dangerous. We believe that the elephant acted instinctively and only tried to protect her young," she concluded.

POACHING

HARDING – Poachers cause havoc. Poaching is becoming a serious problem for farmers in the Harding area. Poachers with their packs of dogs blatantly hunt for buck on farms and totally disregard the fact that they are trespassing on private property, as well as hunting buck farmers are trying to conserve.

They cut fences and leave gates open so that cattle wander into neighbours' maize lands or onto the district road. In the process of their hunting, the poachers sometimes hamstring or slaughter cattle and take away the meat they can carry. The area needs members of KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife to assist stamp out this crime.

A NEW LIFE IN SA FOR UDAY'S LIONS

According to the *Citizen* of 24 May 2003, lions once kept in a private zoo by the son of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein will be moved out of Baghdad to start a new life in the South African bush, animal welfare groups said. The animals, a lioness and her six cubs and two year-old lions, will be relocated to two different South African game reserves in the hope they will form new prides.

"Lions never lose their instinct to hunt. But they have to get fit first," said Louise Joubert, founder of the SanWild Wildlife Trust. "Any animal would be traumatised by what happened in Baghdad. But what better way for them to recuperate from trauma than in the wild bush?"

US troops rescued the lions in April, along with two cheetahs and a blind bear, from a private zoo that Saddam Hussein's eldest son, Uday, established in one of Baghdad's presidential palaces.

Uday, known for his love of fierce animals, fast cars and beautiful women, has owned several lions, tigers and cheetahs, some of them gifts from friendly foreign governments. Like his father, Uday disappeared during the US-led invasion. But the plight of Uday's menagerie has continued to concern animal welfare groups, which have also sought to restore Baghdad's main zoo after it was looted in the mayhem after Saddam's rule collapsed.

Barbara Maas, chief executive of the British-based charity Care for the Wild International, said she persuaded zoo officials and US military authorities to approve relocation of the animals after a recent trip to Baghdad. Even though Uday's pets had been moved to Baghdad's main zoo, the conditions there were still dire, she said. The lions will start at SanWild, a sanctuary in Limpopo, which has already re-introduced two captive lions to the wild.

LION PROBLEM IN MOZAMBIQUE

The March 2003 issue of *Getaway* magazine reprinted a timely warning from the Inhambane Ministry of Fish and Wildlife. Specially directed at those people trudging the bush of Mozambique, it advises as follows:

"Due to the rising frequency of encounters between humans and lion, the Minister of Fish and Wildlife of the Inhambane branch in Mozambique is advising hikers, hunters, fishers, and any motorcyclists who use the outdoors for recreational or work-related functions to take extra care while in the bush.

We advise outdoorsmen to wear little noisy bells on their clothing so as to give advance warning to lion that may be close by so you don't take them by surprise. We also advise anyone using the outdoors to carry pepper spray with them in case of an encounter with a lion. Outdoorsmen should also be on the watch for fresh lion activity and be able to tell the difference between lion cub faeces and big lion faeces. Lion cub faeces are smaller and contain lots of berries and dassie fur. Big lion faeces have bells in them and smell like pepper.

Enjoy your stay in Mozambique."

BUNNY HUGGERS BARK AT SANCTIONING DOG HUNTS

In the BUSH NOTES to the September 2001 issue of the renowned magazine *Getaway* it is reported that wildlife authorities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) hope that issuing permits to hunt with dogs will curb illegal hunting. Robyn Daly reports.

Once King Shaka's personal hunting grounds, the Umfolozi area may well be the site of a revived tradition – hunting with dogs

At night or in the early hours of the morning in certain parts of KwaZulu-Natal, groups of minibus taxis pull up at private game farms. Out pile groups of hunters who release their dogs to hunt at will on the unsuspecting landowner's property, mauling livestock and game in the process. Participants take bets on the outcome and the owner of the first dog to bring an animal down scoops the 'pot'.

This is called a taxi hunt, said Khulani Mkhize, the new head of KZN Wildlife. In reality it is poaching – with dogs instead of snares and AK47s. It is also one of the biggest problems facing KZN conservation at present, not least because the province has come up with a solution which has animal-rights activists up in arms.

Together with the Impendle Hunters Association, KZN Wildlife organised an official dog hunt in the area. Mkhize said the upshot of this was that the event "demonstrated that a disciplined, well-organised and supervised hunt can succeed".

This isn't the last of dog hunting in the province. Plans are to organise a few each year; issue permits and bring the whole thing above board. But why, you may wonder, is KZN Wildlife even entertaining such a thought? And jumping ahead: is the next step to organise legitimate snaring expeditions?

The argument is that dog hunting is a traditional Zulu sport dating back to the time of Shaka. In fact, the Umfolozi was initially conserved as the king's hunting ground for just that, until it was fenced off. Marketed properly, there might be some lucrative tourism spin-offs.

Animal welfare takes the stance that hunting with dogs is unethical and inhumane, while the Centre for Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW) – similarly outraged – asks: "If this brutal sport is so-called traditional, don't you think all interested parties should wear their traditional gear?" KZN Wildlife believes there may be other solutions and Mkhize has asked NGOs and members of the public to offer alternative solutions. In the meantime, it is hoped that issuing permits will control the number of hunts, hunters and dogs being let loose on wildlife.

SOS FOR VIRUNGA AS HUMAN BATTLES OBLITERATE THE WILDS

Since 1990, political upheaval and civil wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo have taken a huge toll on the Virunga National Park in the Great Lakes Region. The effects of the past 11 years have left Virunga a veritable wasteland.

Reports state that large sections of the park have been overrun by woodcutters illegally harvesting redwoods for export and housing developments allegedly authorised by local political leaders. In the last year alone, poachers have killed 15 elephants, 448 hippos, 313 buffaloes, 692 antelopes, 28 warthogs, a lion and a leopard.

Once well known for its huge mammal populations, Virunga is a shadow of its former self. There's no infrastructure, no communication and not too many rangers who would want to work in Virunga: in the past decade more than 80 have died on patrol.

There's one snippet of hope, our sources say that despite loss of habitat, the mountain gorilla population, which also took a dive a few years ago, is now hanging on and numbers are stable.

HUNTERS BRING IN THE BOODLE

In the 20 August 2002 issue of the *Citizen* it is reported that minister Moosa maintains that hunters bring in the boodle. Thousands of foreign hunters generate millions of rands for South Africa's professional hunting industry, Environmental Affairs and Tourism Minister Valli Moosa says.

Responding to written questions, Moosa said that in 2000/1, a total of 1 644 foreign hunters in

Limpopo generated R87-million. This does not include income generated by local hunters, as this information is not available.

Money generated from permit fees in Limpopo goes to the coffers of the province.

In the Eastern Cape, the money goes to the Eastern Cape Tourism Board. There were 1 002 foreign hunters in 1999/2000 and 1 183 in 2000/1.

LEOPARD KILL

In the *Citizen* of 15 August 2003, Buks Viljoen reports on yet another leopard kill, this time involving a nine year old boy. YT has said it before, and it is tragic how frequently the sad story repeats itself, but the leopard is one of the most sadistically successful killers on the planet. Lions are dangerous predators, and there is no doubt they get their fair share of “job-seekers taking a short-cut” through the Park; but for sheer success at catching the planet’s most intelligent animal unawares, with fatal consequences, there is nothing to beat that malevolently beautiful leopard. So Buks Botha reports as follows:

SKUKUZA – The Kruger National Park (KNP) is reeling in shock after a nine-year-old boy was killed in the staff village late yesterday afternoon by a leopard.

Little Tshikani Nobela, whose parents are both members of the senior management team at Skukuza, was walking home alone at around 4pm after visiting a friend. The two children apparently left school together and walked directly to his friend’s house, where they did homework.

While strolling along Grysbok Road on his way home Tshikani, a scholar at the Skukuza Primary School, was attacked by the leopard. The attack happened about 400m from his house and only a few minutes before his parents, Phineas Nobela and Helen Methi, would have arrived home from work.

“The child was probably killed instantly,” said Mr Raymond Travers, spokesman for KNP. The leopard was busy dragging the lifeless body of the child into nearby bushes when two game rangers drove past. At the time he was holding the child’s body in his powerful jaws. While one of the rangers called for help on the radio, the other jumped out of the bakkie, loaded his rifle and shot at the animal.

BEARDED VULTURES HEADING FOR EXTINCTION

The following article appeared in *The Citizen* of 2003.02.10 concerning our famous lammergeiers: MTUBATUBA, KwaZulu-Natal – The number of bearded vultures, South Africa’s largest and rarest vulture, has declined by up to 70 percent over the last 20 years, the Wildlands Trust said yesterday. The findings are contained in a comprehensive survey of the vulture population, said trust CEO Dr Andrew Venter.

Venter said the findings were considered very accurate because researchers, for the first time used a dedicated helicopter to map out the nesting sites. “We realised that ground surveys and previous helicopter mappings had their limitations, so we secured R40 000 for a helicopter. We used a Eurocopter, which is very quiet and caused no visible distress to the birds,” he said. The survey was funded by the Wildlands Trust and undertaken by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, KwaZulu-Natal’s conservation management agency.

Venter said the Wildlands Trust was pleased to have been able to help with the census, which revealed that the bearded vulture – also known as the lammergeier – was in dire straits. Nesting sites had decreased from 32 to a mere nine.

“We hope that with this information, conservation agencies can give the bearded vulture the attention it deserves. Ideally this survey should be followed up with quarterly surveys, just to track nesting patterns over two years. We need to confirm the statistics. We are now urgently seeking funds to continue the survey and to monitor the vulture population. We also need to ascertain what led to the dramatic decline in the numbers of these birds.”

As the story above seemed rather bleak in its assessment of the general position we tried to obtain confirmation from 50/50 who happened to have screened a similar scenario one Sunday evening around about the same date. Unfortunately they did not feel inclined to reply, so we continued on the basis of the Citizen article alone. Knowing about similar problems with the Bearded Vulture in Europe we passed the article on to a Rhodesian Ridgeback breeder there, Nina Roth-Callies, for comment. She is very deeply involved with these vultures, as you will read, but what is very much more important is that they have

been significantly more successful in dealing with the problem than we have – and our Ridgebacks are there too, doing their bit for conservation. Not that we would ever fondly imagine that our dogs are conscientious participants. But they are always more than ready to join in on any activity in open country, and whatever they do they do exceedingly well. On the other hand we must remember that they are not ‘natural born killers’. Of course they are an asset in conservation but, having read about our consummate failure to protect the Lammergeier on the sun baked mountains of Africa, now you can find out what they do in the glacier bedecked Alps of Europe at temperatures approaching minus 40 degrees! Read on.

Thank you for the article about the lammergeier. It is shocking that they decrease in that terrible number in SA. I always thought that Africa was the ‘promised land’ for them. There must be food enough and also the human population in the Drakensberg should not be the limiting factor. So it is really necessary to research the reasons.

In the Alps it was the fear that they kill lambs and they take also little children – to shoot them, and a lot of them were poisoned by putting out bait for the wolves and bears. In my area, the Hohe Tauern, the last lammergeier was shot 1880, and the very last one on the Alps was shot in the Aosta Valley in the north of Italy 1914. They survived only in the Pyrenees, the Himalayas, Afghanistan, and some in Crete and Corsica. All these are of the same subspecies *Gypaetos barbatus barbatus*. The South African is another subspecies *Gypaetos barbatus aureus*. This one is a little bit smaller and has a little black stripe above the eyelid.

In Austria we released 29 lammergeiers, all in my area; they spread by themselves. The first couple to reach maturity took the nearest site for their territory, the next ones went to the next place and so on. Across the Alps we released 106 in four different places, Switzerland, France and Italy in addition to Austria. Since 1997 they have reproduced, and every year there are more couples having babies. These vultures reach maturity after 6-7 years and they have their first young when about 9-10. They lay two eggs within a period of one week, sit on them immediately and incubate them so that the second is born a week after the first. Nine days later a behaviour called cainism starts. The elder attacks the younger till the latter doesn’t ask for food anymore, and it starves to death.

These great birds lay their eggs in December/January; you must realise that this is winter-time in the Alps, with minus 26°C being routine at this altitude, accompanied by snowstorms, ice-storms, etc. and during this time, for 54 days, they have to keep the eggs at a steady temperature of 38,7°C exactly! Both of the partners do the incubating because if it was only one he/she would freeze to death on the nest. When the young hatch it is about the end of February/start of March – at this stage the game (deer and chamois) is already weak and they start taking risks in their efforts to get food: so they fall down the icy waterfalls, or are taken by avalanches. In March/April the big heavy avalanches are coming down killing lots of animals, the best time for vultures to bring up babies.

So you see it is not easy to breed them and, in addition, they are faithful to their partner all their life, which is about 40 years. Some are true to their partner even after death and do not accept another mate! Sorry, but whenever I start to speak about these birds I get ‘emotional’ and it is not easy to stop me.

Please tell me what else you want to know about the project. You know the Ridgebacks helped me to find carcasses/dead animals so that I obtained an overview regarding the food situation of the lammergeiers – the dogs were always with me and more than once they guided me through terrible fog. On one occasion I missed the correct route in the fog (there are no paths up there); I was sure that I had to go down a certain way, but the dog would not come with me. She behaved strangely and refused to obey me when I told her to ‘heel’. I thought she was smelling game and said “okay, check it out, show me what it is”. And immediately she was happy and guided me, and you can imagine my surprise when I noticed that I was one cliff too early for coming down the rocks. If I had continued that way it would have lead to my certain death.

So you see, not only in Africa does one rely on these wonderful dogs.

Editorial policy

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