



Running with the pack

Zambia's big predators are among its most vulnerable wildlife – but one innovative organisation is working hard to protect them. Stephen Cunliffe went on the road with the **Zambian Carnivore Programme** in Liyuwa Plain National Park to find out just what their work involves. ALL PICTURES BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

BUBBLING WITH excitement, I am awake before dawn on the day of the wild dog darting. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee takes me straight into Matamanene Camp kitchen, where I bump into Dr Matt Becker preparing his equipment. There is apprehension in his eyes.

As head of the **Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP)**, Matt is responsible for today's operation. Usually a relaxed character, he appears overnight to have metamorphosed into a highly focused professional. Darting is not a precise science; things can go wrong and sometimes animals die.

Today Matt is planning to dart and fit a new state-of-the-art satellite-tracking collar to the second

most endangered large carnivore in all of Africa, so he is taking his preparations very seriously, triple checking all his immobilising equipment. I recognise radio collars, darts, drugs, the dart gun and a telemetry set protruding from the gear crates.

"Matt, Matt, come in for Jed," the radio crackles to life. Jed Murdoch and Jassiel M'soka are the other members of the ZCP team and they left camp on a quad bike over an hour ago, armed with a VHF radio transceiver, heading to where we left the pack last night. The news isn't good: the dogs have moved.

We were hoping to have the darting procedure completed and be back in time for brunch, but in wildest

Africa things seldom run according to script. Craig Reid, park manager for Liyuwa Plain, quickly rounds up his team. The landrover roars to life and we head out to join the hunt. The crew onboard have signed on for an African Parks participation safari, affording them a rare opportunity to observe and assist.

We're searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Liyuwa plain and the surrounding game management areas are vast and even though one of the dogs is carrying an old VHF radio collar, finding them is proving a real challenge. The radio signal has a range of barely a kilometre, even less if the dog is lying down, so we crisscross the area painstakingly.

Our perseverance finally pays



LEFT TO RIGHT: Searching for a radio signal; Wild dogs roam vast distances across Liyuwa Plain; Spotted hyena darted in the rump; Taking measurements and checking the dentition of hyenas help establish their age and condition.

off when we pick up a weak signal around mid-afternoon. We zero in on the beeping and discover the dogs asleep in the long grass near a small pan. Matt immediately prepares a dart. While we hang back and observe, he edges his vehicle closer, approaching at an unthreatening angle to ensure he doesn't scare the pack. It's windy, so he needs to get within ten metres to take the shot. Every wild dog has a unique coat pattern and the ZCP team search for the pre-selected non-alpha adult male who is to be fitted with the new satellite collar.

After an hour of manoeuvring Matt's can finally line up the shot, aiming for the rump. As he fires, the noise of the compressed gas frightens the dogs, causing them to jump up, and the dart only grazes its target, failing to administer a full dose of its tranquilising drug. The target male walks around looking dazed, ears drooping, but refuses to go down. The ZCP team are on edge

as they monitor the dog. Eventually it settles and they can withdraw to reload. When they try to approach again, however, the dogs are more alert and they can't get close enough.

It's getting late and Matt decides to suspend the operation until the next day, as the dogs will soon be moving off to hunt. He doesn't want to disappoint his enthusiastic team, however. Neither does he want to end the day empty-handed. So we switch tack and head to a nearby hyena den to dart a clan member instead. The individual he selects is much more nonchalant than the skittish dogs and Matt has it down in less than ten minutes.

Late afternoon fades into a spectacular sunset, as we watch the team going about their work collecting tissue samples, taking blood, recording data and fitting the hyena collar. But all I want to do is thank my lucky stars that Matt's dart missed – because now we get to do this all again tomorrow!

ZAMBIAN CARNIVORE PROGRAMME

The **Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP)** is a charitable trust that works in collaboration with the **Zambia Wildlife Authority (ZAWA)** and with the help of **WWF The Netherlands**. Known originally as **African Wild Dog Conservation**, when it focused on the African wild dog in the **Lower Zambezi Valley**, by 2009 the organisation had evolved into a broad-based programme that was concerned with the welfare of all Zambia's large carnivore species. Work includes ecological research, anti-poaching and habitat conservation, as well as the training of Zambian nationals and conservation education in local communities. In 2010, with the support of **African Parks Network (APN)**, the ZCP initiated the **Liyuwa** project, which not only provides immediate conservation and management benefits, but also affords key insights into the competitive interactions among the park's large carnivores.

★ Find out more at: www.zambiacarnivores.org.

