

RAISING A LITTER OF WILD DOG PUPPIES: RELEASE AND REHABILITATION



DogBlog Part Two

DogBlog - Tuesday, 14 September 2010 – Day 4 – Walking with Wild Dogs

Just after six I was greeted by the dogs after I found them near to where I had left them last night. On the move almost immediately, we headed north until we reached the fence where the dogs started following the road next to the fence. It is at a time like this when I wish my dog-whispering skills were a lot better. There is absolutely no sense in just following the fence as this area has been cleared of all vegetation for a fire-break. We cannot chase any game that may be hidden in the bush since there isn't any and the game can see us coming for miles.



I need to get them into the bush; otherwise we are wasting valuable energy. I try all sorts of things to get them to follow me but they continue down the road. I am being as calm and assertive as I can, following the teachings of the real dog whisperer, Cesar Millan. But my pack does not seem to be listening. I walk a little way into the bush and then come back out onto the road and ask them why they are not following. A rhetorical question, I might add. Maybe I'm not giving them the chance to follow me. This time I walk into the bush and keep going. I hear a rustling behind me and look back. To my amazement I see a line of four dogs following my every step.

Now that we are on the same wavelength things get much better. We come across steenbok and scrub hares and the dogs give chase. I have now got them to follow me but how do I tell them when I see something ahead that's worth chasing? Once again the trust that the dogs have put in me gives me a feeling that I don't think I have ever had in my life before. The only problem is that they are out here to learn to survive and me being in front and chasing away all the prey before they even get a chance to sniff it isn't helping.

I slow down and keep stopping, hoping that they will carry on past me. That way they will be the ones that chase up the prey and can get after it as soon as it runs. But they just stop when I stop and slow down when I slow down, looking at me as much as to say: "Why are we stopping?". On the odd occasion that they see, smell or hear something ahead of me, I eagerly encourage them to investigate further and try to stay behind them as long as possible. I'm pretty sure they will get the hang of it soon; realise that they are here for a reason and this is not just jolly good fun to go for a stroll in the country and Dave and Carla will feed us when we are hungry.

We cut across the veld and ended up on the road again. Their choice, not mine. We finished off the morning by lying under a tree close to the main road running through the reserve, allowing all Okonjima guests entering or leaving the reserve a good close-up view. The dogs didn't react to the cars but we were in an ideal location to test the dogs' reaction to other modes of transport used in the reserve, i.e. motorbikes, bicycles, quad bikes and people on foot. We arranged the tests for later in the day when the dogs would be a little more active and attentive.





Being close to the road presented an ideal opportunity to feed the dogs. They hadn't eaten since Saturday and we had to keep up their energy levels so they could continue with their hunting attempts. Not having much to go on in terms of how much food to give them in this situation, we just played it by ear. They were very pleased to see food, although they didn't see it for long as it lasted nanoseconds. It was now the middle of the day; it was hot and what else could we do but go back to sleep under a tree.

At 16:45 the 'transport/people' experiment began. The dogs were starting to get active and watched in amazement as people and vehicles of all sizes and colours drove backwards and forwards to see what the reaction would be. There was exactly the same reaction when people walked past the dogs – absolutely none whatsoever. This was an enormous relief to us. We were very worried as to how they were going to behave but they passed the test with flying colours.

The bicycles left, the quad bikes left and the members of the test team drove off leaving us to figure out what that was all about. It was just too complicated to try and explain it to the pack so I left them wondering. Half an hour later we stretched our legs, walked slowly to the main gate, turned around and walked slowly back to where we had been lying. Eventually we headed off into the bush. Obviously the full stomachs were having an effect

on productivity as our speed was even quite pleasant for me, for a change. We probably walked for a kilometre before it started to get dark and I left them for the night.

Distance covered today: 4 km

Total distance covered: 16 km

DogBlog - Wednesday, 15 September 2010 – Day 5 – Walking with Wild Dogs

Once again my charges were in the same area I had left them the evening before. After our morning greeting we set off at speed, them walking fast and me trotting. We were following the fence again and I decided that as soon as I could influence the direction I would get them into the bush. Half an hour later they all huddled into a ball and lay down again. I think this was due to the temperature as this morning was rather nippy. Once the sun started to give off a bit of heat we were up and away but still following the fence. I was now in front, so angled off into the bush closely followed by the rest of the pack. Noses in the air and ears scanning the area ahead, they spread out on either side of me and we actually looked like a pack of wild dogs with a purpose. Although there were only a few half-hearted chases of distant game, I felt that they were starting to react more like a pack should. The messages being relayed from one dog to the other once one of them got a scent or saw something in the distance was plain for even me to see.



08:45 was rest time again. I called in the ITV film crew to do the last interview before filming for Cheetah Kingdom was a wrap. The dogs lay sleeping and I knelt in the sun squinting at the camera.

After the crew left we dozed. At 17:00 the dogs came over to where I was lying and twittered and frolicked in a pre-hunt greeting. I jumped up, gathered my gear and threw everything on my back ready for the off. The dogs, still excited, ran over to the tree they had been sleeping under for most of the day and went back to sleep for another hour.

At last we were on our way and this time we went straight into the bush, moving quite slowly but with purpose. We chased a few oryx (without purpose). A warthog family moved into view and all four dogs rushed after them. Spot got hold of a young one but was chased off by Mum. The girls were all busy running after whatever they could see and the warthog Ruby was chasing went down a hole. We had been in this position before, with all four dogs' heads stuck down a hole with a live cruise missile, liable to go off at any moment, pointing at them. I don't know if wild wild dogs do this or not. Maybe it is something that our hand-reared ones have yet to learn but

I do know that the dogs will come off worse if it came down to a full-on confrontation. I am going to make a rule book for the dogs and rule number one will be: Do not stick your head down a hole, especially if you have just chased a warthog down there.

The dogs veered off in the direction of the road, chasing up a few oryx, but nothing with any conviction. We ended up close to the car at 18:50 and as it got dark I left them once again.

Distance covered today: 4.5 km

Total distance covered: 20.5 km

DogBlog - Thursday, 16 September 2010 – Day 6 – Walking with Wild Dogs

This is starting to get monotonous now and I have vowed to try and get them away from the road and the main gate and into a different part of the reserve. Yes, I met them in the same old place and started off down the road with the intention of taking them to the area in the south-east where there is a lot of game. Ruby found some road kill, a scrub hare, and ran off twittering, not letting anyone else have any of it. Eventually the other three got a few scraps but nothing more. We headed off towards the mountains and away from the road. Hurray! The pack was being very thorough, walking slowly but all paying attention to each other and moving as a pack. There was no sign of anything until they reached the base of the mountain. I spotted a herd of kudu through the bush but the dogs had already seen it and were on the trail. The terrain here is very rocky and has lots of low thorn bush which hindered my advance, so I headed for the track close by and ran down towards them, reaching them as kudu and dogs were flying in all directions. Lots of excitement, but no cigar!

A slow walk after this found us back at the waterhole. I was glad that they remembered where it was as I was not going to be around for much longer to help them find it. They drank and had a bit of a soak but then pushed on further into the valley. After chasing some more kudu they found a small stream-bed and headed up the mountain using the stream as a pathway. Upon reaching a sheer cliff face towering above us they decided that it was time to stop and sleep. I have to say that this was the worst resting point that they had chosen since they had been released. There was very little shade as most of the trees were dead and even the dogs were suffering, fidgeting and trying to squeeze into areas with a square foot of shadow. I ended up building myself a lean-to from branches and grass just to get a little respite from the sun.

At 17:30 I decided that enough was enough; I had to lead them out of the area. I headed off back down the stream-bed and back onto the track leading to the waterhole. A little hesitant at first, the pack saw sense eventually and started to follow me out. It was here that I began to doubt the intelligence of my charges. I set them up perfectly with a young oryx standing about 20 metres away in the road. I stopped and the dogs carried on at a slow walk, eventually seeing the animal that was staring in disbelief at the four of them approaching. They could have reached out and bitten it on the rump but seemed to be in a trance and did not even attempt to put on speed and bring it down. Just when I thought we were going to be triumphant, the mother ran at the dogs and then turned and fled with its youngster.



They then took a slow walk (even for me) back in the direction of the road and joined it two kilometers from the main gate. Turning right, they investigated one of the dry rivers the road passes through and chased up an eland. This had to be it. I was about 200 metres away from them and they had the eland in the open and were circling it. Ruby tried a few bites at the rear end but did not make contact. Spot seemed to be moving in for the kill. I had my camera pointed at the whole scene and watched in the disjointed way one does when staring down a lens. Here we go. They all moved forward together. The eland spun round. Ruby was still at the rear and tried a few more times to get hold of it. Then Spot turned and ran off into the riverbed, closely followed by Ricki and Raine. Only Ruby was left with the eland and obviously decided that this "team-work" wasn't all it was cracked up to be, so she turned and followed her siblings.

The eland, as surprised as I was at this turn of events, suddenly realised that she had eluded death and took the opportunity to flee at speed. Two minutes later a steenbok came flying out of the bush, followed by the dogs who had absolutely no chance of catching it. They then gave up for the evening and started to follow me. I left them for the night

Distance covered today: 8.5 km

Total distance covered: 29 km

DogBlog - Friday, 17 September 2010 – Day 7 – Walking with Wild Dogs

This morning was a nice cloudy cool one. On meeting the dogs it was obvious that they wanted to take full advantage of this so we set off immediately in the direction of the Villa and through the bush, as opposed to the road, which can only be good. The "team-work" seems good this morning and the pack is spread out, but not too thinly, and moving forward as one. There seems to be a distinct lack of prey animals this morning; not good for a training session in hunting.

Suddenly three warthogs burst out of the bush. The dogs quickly give chase and I (not so quickly) follow. Another failed attempt but an attempt all the same. After regrouping we continue towards the Villa and meet up with some Okonjima guests along the way. This presents another chance to introduce the dogs to a vehicle and people that they don't know. All goes well with the dogs pretty much ignoring the car and the guests get some wonderful photographic opportunities.



We eventually end up at the Villa and I am keen to see how the dogs will react to these buildings in the middle of nowhere. Everyone there has been briefed as to what not to do and all huddle on the veranda hoping to get a good view of the dogs. The dogs are very inquisitive, taking their time walking past the different buildings and sniffing everything they see, including the ornamental metal warthogs. If only it was that easy! Finally they find the waterhole, have a drink, then move away about half a kilometer to settle for the hot period.

As payment for showing off my pack, I got breakfast at the Villa. Carla and I had decided that today would be the day I would leave the dogs while they were sleeping so that I could actually get some work done. I checked that they were still asleep and returned at 16:15. I was met with the usual greeting and we all headed back towards the Villa. An oryx standing in the road caused a bit of a stir when it charged them. They



had the good sense to run away and things returned to normal. They investigated the buildings at the Villa again. This time they noticed their reflections in the window. Thinking these were other dogs they started calling and moved to the back of the building to try and see them from behind.



We had more water at the waterhole and then headed off into new territory and since there were no fences nearby I had high hopes for a kill. The

first beast we came across was an aardwolf, which the dogs didn't chase. The next were two bat-eared foxes; these they seemed to enjoy chasing. There were two kudus after this and not much else. We had left the car next to a waterhole (another one they needed to remember the location of) and by 18:45 when we arrived the dogs seemed tired. I was hoping that they would settle down and let me leave. Some hope. Every time I tried to drive away they followed. I sat in the car until just before dark and slowly drove away towards the closest gate. On getting out to unlock it I saw the dogs running down the road towards me. Luckily I did not have to wait long before one of them got the scent of a passing kudu and they all ran off, leaving me free to open the gate and exit.

Distance covered today: 10.5 km

Total distance covered: 39.5 km

DogBlog - Saturday, 18 September 2010 – Day 8 – Walking with Wild Dogs

By 05:50 I was at the gate where I had left the dogs the previous evening. While tracking for the dogs I was very surprised to find them right behind me *on the wrong side of the reserve fence*. After a few expletives I decided to get them back into the reserve and then find out how they had escaped. Luckily the dogs were used to following me and I led them through the gate. Now they were safely inside I could give them a proper greeting. I checked the fence for holes. Eventually I came across the problem. One of the gates was standing wide open – an oryx had hit the gate at speed, busting the padlock and lifting the gate at the hinges. I shut the gate and tied it up with all of us safely back in the reserve.



After all the excitement was over we headed off, somewhat late. After a shaky start, with the dogs following my every move, they took the lead and I let them have their head. A few half-hearted attempts at some kudus actually left me quite disappointed. We had been at this for a week and apart from the kudu they caught on the second day (which they hardly touched), the dogs hadn't managed to catch anything. There was no doubt in my mind that they would get the hang of it eventually; they had chased enough animals, so obviously they knew that this was what they were supposed to do. But they needed to grasp the concept that the animals they were chasing were their *food* so they

really needed to catch them. Of course we would not let them starve and would keep on supplementing their diet but they really needed to understand what rehabilitation was all about.

The dogs led me back to their soft-release enclosure. It had been a week and we had come full circle. They ran inside for a drink and lay down under a tree. I left them there for the midday sleeping session and went back to talk tactics with Carla.

We decided it was time to cut the apron strings a little bit as perhaps it was me that was stopping them from hunting rather than chasing. Maybe they were waiting for me to make the kill or it was due to my lumbering and noisy body that the prey was managing to elude them. From now on I would let them go out on their own in the mornings and evenings and would only check on them at midday when they were resting. We felt it was time to feed them again in order to keep up their energy levels.

I returned at 15:30 and gave them their food, which they devoured. There was no reason to stay longer as they had full bellies and would sleep for the rest of the day.

Distance covered today: 7.5 km

Total distance covered: 47 km

Epilogue

And so ended my week with the wild dogs. I came out of the experience a slightly fitter person but most of all I was humbled to be in the presence of such an amazing animal and privileged beyond words to have been accepted as one of the pack. To be present during the daily walks through the bush, the many chases of game and their first kill, has allowed me to understand the incredible bond these animals have and why the pack is above all the most important part of their being.

I am sure they will go from strength to strength and I will not have to worry about them in the future, although I still will. I also hope that from time to time they will allow me back into the pack and remember our incredible week for as long as I will.

Postscript.

On Sunday morning, 19 September, the dogs killed their first warthog, an old adult male; four days later they brought down one of the many wild donkeys roaming the reserve. Not the sort of game one would expect but excellent news all the same.

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