

RAISING A LITTER OF WILD DOG PUPPIES: RELEASE AND REHABILITATION



In May 2005 our lives changed dramatically when seven three-week-old wild dog puppies arrived at AfriCat. Rearing five of them to adulthood was a series of trials and tribulations – an experience we will never forget. Sadly we lost two puppies quite early on but Raine, Ricki, Ruby, Rex (Spot) and Rufus (Mouse) kept us on our toes. Completely exhausted through most of the early months we don't remember much, but one thing that did astound us was the amazing bond the puppies had between them. Even though they were so tiny and there were no adult dogs in their small pack, they only needed us to supply the food and once that disappeared (in a matter of milliseconds) they were quite happy with the company and companionship of each other for play and comfort.



Right from the start, Raine was the alpha female and Spot took the position of alpha male. At four months of age we released our small pack into an enclosure where we ceased all direct contact. We still saw them every day and we were still given an unbelievably warm and happy greeting each morning but there was no touching or stroking. We took this decision for two reasons. One was that their “playful” bites were just becoming too painful to bear (even wearing three pairs of trousers, boots and gloves) and the other was that we felt they were now old enough to be a little more independent.

Life returned to some degree of normality until at the age of nine months Mouse had a gastric torsion. This required an emergency trip to the vet and a few worrying weeks while he recovered. For us the most painful part was hearing the other dogs crying and calling for him while he was away. This was the first time one of them had to be separated from the rest of the group. It was an experience we didn't want to repeat in a hurry. But a few weeks later Ricki fractured one of her legs and the separation once again was heart-wrenching. Apart from Spot and Mouse having vasectomies (to prevent breeding between the siblings) which required them to be kept apart from the others for a short time, this close-knit group didn't have to be separated again.





Another memorable milestone was when the females went on heat for the first time. It was a real shock when the girls turned on each other and started fighting. It took us a while to figure out what was happening and we felt utterly helpless at having to watch these attacks take place without being able to intervene.

In September 2009 we lost Mouse to haemorrhagic gastritis and congenital kidney failure. We were absolutely devastated as were the rest of the pack who called for their missing sibling for two weeks.

Five years on, almost to the day of their arrival at AfriCat, the dogs were radio-collared, vaccinated and moved to a soft-release enclosure in preparation for their release into the 40 000-acre rehabilitation reserve on Okonjima. This was the first time that all the dogs were darted simultaneously and in spite of our worrying about how they were going to react, everything ran smoothly. There was however a major change in the dog's hierarchy when they all recovered from the anaesthetic. Raine was no longer top dog and Ricki, formerly the underdog, had usurped Raine's position. This came as a big surprise to us but this behaviour has been observed in captive wild dog packs before. Spot, now the only male, immediately stood by Ricki and didn't leave her side.

The big day dawned and unlike all the cheetah releases into the reserve, the dogs didn't hesitate to leave the confines of the enclosure. They followed us out of the gate and just carried on running. It was a bitter-sweet day for us; watching the dogs run free wasn't as easy as we thought it would be.

I have summarised the last five years into one page. If you want to read the stories of the rearing of the wild dogs in more detail, you can access past newsletters on this website:

[AfriCat Newsletter Volume 13 No. 2 2005 – Raising a Litter of Wild Dog Puppies](#)

[AfriCat Newsletter Volume 13 No. 3&4 2005 – Raising a Litter of Wild Dog Puppies – The Next Chapter](#)

[AfriCat Newsletter Volume 14 No. 1 2006 – Raising a Litter of Wild Dog Puppies – All Grown Up](#)

[AfriCat Newsletter Volume 14 No. 2 2006 – Updates: Wild Dogs](#)

[AfriCat Newsletter Volume 15 2007 – Wild Dogs Reach Sexual Maturity](#)

From the time they were released, Dave spent every daylight hour following (and in some cases leading) the dogs' movements in the reserve. The first three days of Dave's DogBlog follows:

DogBlog - Saturday, 11 September 2010 - Release Day – Day 1 – Walking with Wild Dogs.



After the release I was left with four very tired dogs. They had spent the last few hours running around like headless chickens taking in every new sight and smell imaginable.

Luckily for me they had remained very close to their soft-release enclosure and were now lying in a big heap in the shade of an acacia tree. I had provisioned myself with sandwiches and coffee, both of which I had not thought I would get the chance to enjoy. I thought there would be a manic rush through the bush trying to keep up with the dogs but I was relieved when this didn't happen and

the next few hours turned into a somewhat boring dog-sitting session.

As the sun started to lose its power, the bush began to come alive but the dogs either weren't aware they were supposed to get mobile at this time or they were so exhausted by their earlier explorations that they didn't have an ounce of energy left. Five rather curious, and in my opinion, very foolish warthogs wandered by and kept staring at the pile of sleeping dogs. Their curiosity got the better of them and a large female warthog kept moving closer and closer. By this time they had the dogs' attention and Spot and Ruby got up and walked slowly towards them, followed by Raine and Ricki.

Truthfully, I think the dogs wanted to play, but as the warthog and Spot walked towards each other at the same speed, all hell broke loose. The female warthog, now joined by the rest of the family, charged Spot who ran away. Spot then turned around and chased the warthog. Each of the other dogs picked a warthog and the scenario was repeated with dogs chasing some of the time and warthogs the rest. Although all this had my attention from the beginning I was frantically getting my "dog-following kit" together, expecting a few hours on the run. Once fully kitted I rushed after the now fast-disappearing dog/warthog confrontation which had taken to the thick bushes. It was still bedlam when I managed to catch up with what can only be described as a scene from an early black-and-white comedy: a dog chased a warthog from left to right and the same dog came running back seconds later with a warthog fast on its tail.

There were lots of grunts and yelps and I am worried that my charges have been injured in their first attempt at catching their dinner. Still the madness continued, ending a few minutes later with all four dogs sticking their heads down a rather large hole. I had been running from pillar to post, dodging dogs and warthogs. I eventually arrived at the hole to be met by all four dogs flying backwards, closely followed by a large warthog coming out, head first, then retreating back into the hole. Although I had only been in a wild dog pack for a few hours, even I knew that this was not good: those pigs have sharp tusks! I told the kids to leave it well alone. Did they listen? They went on to try and dig the warthog out. During this process the warthog poked its head out of the hole four more times, until the dogs got bored and went and had a drink of water from the pond inside the enclosure and lay under a tree. I saw blood on Spot's rump but on closer examination it seemed to be a flesh wound. By now it was getting dark and the dogs' first night alone was drawing closer. I hoped I would find them all safe and in one piece in the morning.

Distance covered today: 2 km

Total distance covered: 2 km

DogBlog - Sunday, 12 September 2010 – Day 2 – Walking with Wild Dogs



06:00 - Much to my surprise I found the dogs exactly where I had left them last night and was relieved to see Spot and the others were all fine. After a greeting session with lots of twittering and "where the hell were you all night" noises, they seemed eager to set off. I gave them the go-ahead and we left at a brisk pace into the bush. It was just starting to get light, which was great, as I could see the thorn bushes coming towards me and avoid the scratches. The dogs seemed to know what they were doing, fanning out and walking in a disorganized line to flush out prey. I just wish that they would take the tallest member of the pack into consideration when choosing their route.

It suddenly dawned on me that I was probably the only person in the whole world that was doing this right now. I can only say that it is a privilege to be considered as part of the pack and to witness wild dogs hunting (or in our case learning to hunt) first-hand.

They led me through some pretty thick bush and every now and then they would rush off after something or other. Some of the things I could see, others would run away from me and all I got was the sense of urgency

in the dogs' forward motion. In other words, they were running and I couldn't keep up. After each chase I had to use the radio-telemetry to find in which direction they had gone. My crotchety knees were complaining and a few other crotchety things I did not even know I had. One thought kept running through my mind "you are way too old for this and by the end of the week you will either be really fit or dead".

One last chase seemed a little faster than the rest and they lost me way back in the bush. This time, however, I didn't need the telemetry to find them, I just followed the screams of whatever it was they had just caught. I couldn't believe that they had been out for just over a day and had already caught something. To my amazement it was not just a "something", it was a fully-grown adult female kudu. I caught up with them in the river with Spot holding onto the kudu's nose and the three girls attacking the rear. I will not go into detail of what transpired as I am sure you all know how gruesome a wild dog kill can be. Suffice it to say, they managed to finish her off a lot quicker than I thought they would.

The annoying part was that they didn't eat much of their first kill. This was probably because they had been fed yesterday. But that aside, I was very proud to be a part of that wild dog pack at that moment. Exhausted, but proud.

We left the kill after an hour and headed off to the south, ending up back at the soft-release enclosure where the dogs had a dip and a drink and lay under the same tree as yesterday. This was the start of the routine: active in the morning until about 09:00; then lie under a tree for eight hours; then get up and walk/run until sunset.

At 17:00 we were on the move again and headed back to the kill. Just a sniff this time; then we moved off towards the south. Once more we chased whatever we could see. I lie: I could see a lot more than they could and, as much as I told them about it, they weren't interested. I wasn't about to chase after it on my own, so we just carried on. We made our way to the southern fence and then turned east following the bush running parallel to the fence, occasionally chasing oryx, kudu, steenbok and at one stage a scrub hare. I left them when it was just getting dark and headed back to the car.

Distance covered today: 4 km

Total distance covered: 6 km

DogBlog - Monday, 13 September 2010 – Day 3 – Walking with Wild Dogs



06:00 – I found the dogs and was once again met with a pack greeting. We headed off almost immediately towards the far south-east of the reserve, an area usually packed with game. Getting there wasn't easy for an old dog like me but we managed to chase, but not catch, at least 7 different animals. Between the chasing we were trotting. Well I was. The dogs were walking, but somewhat faster than I could. I managed to talk them down from the mountain at one stage. I don't know whose idea this was but it wasn't a good one. There are a lot of thorn bushes and big rocks up there, which quite frankly, I didn't have the energy to deal with.

Two hours later we ended up at a waterhole and they took a while to drink before we headed deeper into the valley. There were a lot of animals in the area and we chased a fair number of kudus before heading back to the water and resting under a tree.

This place was somewhat different from the others where they had rested, with many animals continually coming in to drink and thus interfering with our midday siesta. We took time to chase four kudus, three warthogs, an oryx and two honey badgers. All were half-hearted attempts.

It started to cool down by 17:30. We got up and had our customary greeting before heading out of the valley in the direction we had entered. My plan was to leave them there, sneak back to the car and pick them up again in the morning. Alas, this didn't happen. Every time I thought I had managed to ditch them, they would turn up in single file behind me. Don't get me wrong, I feel pretty special that they trusted me enough to follow me but I didn't want them to end up in the same place we were this morning. If this happened we were going nowhere.

Unfortunately they did follow me back to the car and I left them there as it got dark.

Distance covered today: 6 km

Total distance covered: 12 km

To be continued.....

Carla Conradie & Dave Houghton
AfriCat Foundation
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