

Issue 1 2020

The Wild Lens

magazine for photographers



Deby Dixon

Chris Garner

Cameron Lee

Dheeraj Mali

Arindam Saha

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WILDAID

White-bellied pangolins like Juba have been reclassified as endangered due to poaching.

Join WildAid and Djimon Hounsou to learn how you can protect these shy and sweet creatures before they go extinct.

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Publisher's Note

I recently had the pleasure of attending an event for WildAid, an organization that is an advocacy group



around the globe for distressed wildlife species, many of whom are on the brink of extinction. It was apparent that WildAid is involved in significant and impactful work to attempt to save our most valuable species before it's too late. WildAid has penetrated areas that are the most distressed globally for wildlife and has also incepted programs to educate the younger populations, hopefully ensuring a better future for our animal friends.

In this issue, we are lucky to have the detailed chronicles of Deby Dixon, a devoted wildlife photographer who has spent nearly a decade following the detailed trials and tribulations of several wolf packs in Yellowstone National Park. This article coincides with the 25th anniversary of the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone. Estimates are that, between 1914 and 1926, at least 136 wolves were killed inside the park. By the 1940's, wolf packs were rarely reported there. Sadly, by the mid-1900s, wolves had been almost eliminated from USA's then, 48 states. Wolves are making a comeback!

We also have an impactful article about the global ranger summit, written by Ranjan Ramchandani; an account of a first trip to the African bush by Cameron Lee; a disabled leopard cub fighting for survival by Dheeraj Mali and Arindam Saha's Indian vulture day. Enjoy conservation editor Lori Lundin's article about the pangolin plight, released just before World Pangolin Day, February 15. Let's cherish these beautiful, elusive creatures, barely seen by humans but trafficked for their scales, before it's too late.

Michelle Liles
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FOLLOWING THE PACK

“I soon learned that wolves were just as controversial amongst those that love them as they are amongst those that hate them.”

When the opportunity arose to spend winter near Yellowstone, I made it my mission to learn about the wolves in the valley where they were reintroduced, nearly 20 years before. I was not intent on disproving my son, only on learning for myself the truth about the wolves.

Pulling the travel trailer in which I'd been living for a couple of years while volunteering in other national parks or just roaming around, I headed to Yellowstone in October of 2012. Truthfully, this was the most exciting journey of my life and, rather than doing tons of research beyond watching a couple of wolf videos, I decided to allow the adventure to unfold - to walk in with eyes wide open and with no expectations except spending time in our nation's first national park, where the inscription on the arch read "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People."

Upon my arrival, I soon learned that wolves were just as controversial amongst those that love them as they are amongst those that hate them. I'm an animal lover and had historically had a "cute, fluffy and innocent," vision of wild animals. But, in Yellowstone, I began to see the realities of wildlife and their struggles to survive. Some had to die so others could live. I began to see how an imbalance between prey animals and predators can destroy our ecosystem through overgrazing, which can then lead to a collapse of river banks, then a lack of insects and rodents to feed the birds who replant the seeds; seeds being at the beginning of the chain. I began to see that each element of nature is designed to work together to keep our planet healthy. And with the realization of that truth, I slowly left the cute, fluffy, "I wuv wolfs," phase of my life for acceptance of nature on its terms.

A Seven-Year Study of the Wolves of Yellowstone National Park

Photos and story by Deby Dixon

Many years ago my son, a North Idaho-born outdoorsman, did his best to convince me that wolves were the vilest beings that walked the earth.

David told me stories about how the wolves that were reintroduced in 1995 were the wrong ones—Canadian wolves, he said, much larger and more destructive. And those big wolves were killing all of the elk. My inbox filled with one gory photo after another of animals killed by wolves. He didn't like the thought of the elk suffering by the "tooth" of the wolf or that their calves were killed before being born.

My son had been doing his research and talking to other "wolf haters" while I, on the other hand, knew virtually nothing about the animals. And so, rather than argue I mostly just listened, unable to imagine that any son of mine would hate an animal of any type for no reason.



“I believed in the wolf because it had a job to do in our ecosystem and played a vital role in keeping the planet healthy for all beings.”



Soon after my arrival in Yellowstone and the day after I had seen her for the first time on a distant hill, a famous wolf, “06”, was killed. I didn’t know 06 at all and had just learned about her existence as alpha female of the Lamar Canyon pack. That glimpse of the famous wolf and her pack, lounging on a high, distant ridge, had filled me with hope and excitement to see more of these wolves in the future.

With the death of 06 came a huge outcry from people who had gotten to know and love the wolves. The Lamar Canyon pack, living in the Lamar Valley area of the park, was frequently watched. That changed after the death of 06, when the pack moved out of Yellowstone.

Guide companies complained about the loss of revenue due

to these famous wolves being killed, while wolf-watching visitors vowed to quit spending their money in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. A boycott of Gardiner, MT, near where many of the wolves had been killed was called for by wolf advocates. Death threats by wolf lovers towards wolf hunters became frequent and were met with the death of more wolves.

I remember being bewildered that anyone could hate wolves so much that they would target national park wolves. This felt like a hatred I had never glimpsed before. And I felt my own anger while driving up to Jardine, north of Gardiner, when I saw hunters lined up watching the park boundary and a horse carcass. The wolves didn’t appear to have a chance against all of those rifles. And I became a wolf advocate, just like that.

I believed in the wolf because it had a job to do in our ecosystem and played a vital role in keeping the planet healthy for all beings. I vowed to learn about and enjoy the wolves at every opportunity and to truthfully share everything – the good, the bad and the ugly – with anyone who wanted to read about my daily experiences, complete with many poor-quality, distant wolf images.

I encountered a small, skinny black wolf that some visitors had nicknamed “Spitfire” when she went out to hunt bison as a solo wolf. This was not a pretty wolf, in the traditional sense, and she reminded me of my first horse. She was black, gangly and some might say “ugly”, but I only saw her beauty.

Spitfire returned to Lamar in the spring of 2013 to help

her sister, “Middle Grey”, with puppies that were born in late April. The two sisters were followed by a large, grey male with a floppy ear, nicknamed “Big Grey,” and later by the sisters’ brother, nicknamed “Prince.” And, just like that, we had wolves from the Lamar Canyon pack back in the park again.

Spitfire wasn’t the most popular wolf, perhaps because she was so scrawny with big ears, a skinny neck, and a long nose. But I fell for her immediately. This was a wolf that would go hungry to feed her sister’s pups. She would often wander the road, seemingly oblivious to people and traffic, while looking for roadkill to eat.

The first time I saw this wolf, fortuitously when no one else was around, I had heard a splash in the creek and went to look.

The little black wolf was standing in Soda Butte Creek, staring at a youngish bull elk with only one antler. This was not a violent scene, in some ways rather serene, in other ways comical. Elk looked at the wolf, and the wolf looked at elk. The two, predator and prey, circled each other. I stood back behind a signpost, being as quiet as possible to not disturb nature. I was fascinated, yet clueless – completely mesmerized and barely able to breathe. I couldn't believe the scene was all for me.



Spitfire felt like my wolf after that and I went to Soda Butte Valley looking for her every day, many days getting “skunked” because none of the animals had collars and therefore couldn't be tracked. Other days I was blessed with incredible sightings. The “little black wolf” seemed to be attached to Big Grey. Watchers didn't have much hope for the big grey male because he seemed to come across as lazy and perhaps not the brightest, but he proved them wrong. He eventually turned out to be one of the strongest and most beloved wolves in Yellowstone.

I managed to see my first wolf pups in July of 2013. I had a brief glimpse of two small black pups one morning and looked forward to watching them grow up.

But the government shutdown of 2013 happened. Sadly, when the park reopened, Middle Grey and her two pups were gone and we never knew their fate. At some point, in late

winter, Prince died on a remote mountain top. It was just Spitfire and Big Grey left and they were collared later in the year as “926” and “925”, respectively.

Once the two wolves were collared, and thus found more easily, the tiny Lamar Canyon pack quickly gained in popularity on social media. The tiny black wolf and the big grey lug represented hope for a revival of the “Lamar Canyons” and it wasn't long before people began coming to Yellowstone just to see them.



In the spring of 2014, Spitfire retired to the den area, most likely the one used by her grandmother. During late summer we finally learned that there were seven puppies, six blacks and one grey. The entire family was fat and healthy and it was then that we realized what a great wolf Big Grey was. Once he unveiled his family, Big Grey seemed to love showing them off. We got to watch eight happy wolves (one pup had disappeared) as they traveled in a line across Lamar Valley. The wolves were never very close, but I tried often to get shots of the entire family. This was a happy time and it seemed that all was well in Lamar Valley at last.

But in March of 2013 disaster struck when Big Grey was attacked by the Prospect Peak pack. Two of his sons seemed to brave those big adult wolves. They ran towards the fray to

lead the enemy away from their dad, and they survived. Meanwhile, Big Grey limped off, mortally wounded, and died a few days later. He was deemed a hero in Yellowstone, sacrificing himself so his family could get away. The stories of his bravery were legendary. Many tears fell in the park at the news of his death and upon learning that Spitfire and his pups had gone to visit him one last time before he died.

Spitfire appeared visibly shaken by the death of her mate and for several days we watched the pups as they scrounged around for food on old carcasses. Finally, mom found a deer carcass left near the road after a vehicle strike and devoured a big meal before calling the puppies together. It seemed their lives would resume. The family went on a successful hunt and we were encouraged by that. Despite Spitfire being pregnant, all would be okay.

The Lamar Canyons traveled across most of the Northern Range in days to come, with Spitfire scent-marking along the way. It appeared as though she was letting the males from the Prospect pack know that she was “available”. The males arrived and Spitfire's pups barked and howled, seemingly in

disapproval of the intrusion. As if in a Shakespearan drama, Spitfire joined these males. The ugly twist was that the pups would have nothing to do with the wolves that killed their dad and they all left together.

Human emotions were up-and-down with thousands of people pulling for the survival of the Lamar Canyons and hoping for a new fairy-tale ending. But that ending never came. The six pups eventually set up residence outside of the park where one was poached and some got mange and eventually



died of starvation. The two black female pups, “Little T” and “Big T”, both returned to the pack, much to our delight. The grey pup was last seen in Lamar Valley with a leg injury.

There was also the drama that unfolded just before Spitfire was to give birth when the males left her and returned to the Prospect pack. In advance of having pups, female wolves generally train the males to bring them food. But Spitfire had not had an opportunity to do this. Shortly after giving birth, she appeared and went to a nearby carcass to feed, leaving visitors to worry for her pups on a very cold day which, seemingly, were too young to be left alone.

Eventually, we had four males from the Prospect pack, “Twin”, “Mottled”, “965” and “Dark Black”. Once again life looked good for the Lamar Canyons and we waited to see pups. Finally, on July 29th, I found them: five pups!

What a thrill that was for about two seconds as hundreds even thousands of people converged on the Lamar den area to see the pups and watch their daily antics. But we were saddened to see that the pups were inflicted with mange. This was difficult to watch, as the pups remained small and were suffering as they lost more and more fur. Several of the adults also got mange, including Spitfire. This pack just didn't seem to get a break. Eventually, all of the pups were either killed or just disappeared.

Hope flourished once again when 965 returned to Spitfire—he had been run off by her second partner, Twin. The pack was once again three with Spitfire, 965 and Little T. It was good to see Spitfire happy and playful again. Eventually though, 965 was replaced by two males from the Beartooth pack, “949” and “Dot”. For some time 965 tried to remain dominant, but without success He ultimately left and joined a pack outside of the park. Unfortunately, he was soon killed by a hunter.

Another Beartooth male came along, “Husky”, and he became Spitfire’s “leading man” and she appeared to be happy once again. I remember seeing her playing with the boys one morning and she was eating up the attention they gave her. But, soon after, Husky disappeared, probably hit by a car. Then, 949 became the leading male and mated with both mother and daughter. We never saw pups from them that year. That summer, 949 died of distemper.

After the death of 949, Spitfire, fully recovered from mange, disappeared and went out on her own, but eventually returned and yielded the alpha female role to her daughter, Little T. Spitfire had lost so many mates and never gave up, always appearing to move forward with hope that things would work out next time.

Life for the three Lamar Canyons settled down some and both mother and daughter gave birth to pups that year. But then the Junction Butte pack invaded the Lamar den area and the Lamars were forced to move. By this time Spitfire had lost her collar, so there was no way to track the pack. Eventually Twin, Black and Mottled, who had come from the Prospect pack, all died.

The Lamars were eventually seen with a black pup but they had been forced to move further east and often spent time out of the park.

Tragically, Spitfire was shot and killed as she stood in the road in Silver Gate, MT, and her living story came to an end. By this time, she had become the most famous wolf in the park and the outcry was heard from all over the world. My heart was broken and I struggled hard to maintain some civility towards hunters. The outcry, the death threats, the hysteria, were deafening. I believed that Spitfire had lived her life with dignity, showing incredible strength in the face of more than her share of life's heartbreaks and that she deserved that in death.



“All we can do is to continue educating, try to work together and try to be respectful of those whose opinions differ from ours.”



Today, Dot and Little T have at least a couple of puppies and are rarely seen, as they are not collared. Wolf hunting season takes place six months out of the year, so their lives are constantly in jeopardy. All we can do is to continue educating, try to work together and try to be respectful of those whose opinions differ from ours.

At the moment, the Junction Butte pack has taken over much of the old Lamar Canyon territory and is seen nearly every day with their 21 members: ten pups and 11 adults. Several of the wolves are very habituated around people, perhaps too much. It would appear that this pack, due to

visibility and popularity, though doing well now, is going the way of the Lamar Canyons and others before them and existing in jeopardy.

Upon her death, I began calling Spitfire the “Little Black Wolf That Could.” The benefit of watching her life was that I have never given up on the wolves or my ability to be in Yellowstone to observe them. The human/wolf struggles continue and we persevere in our efforts to protect wolves. For over seven years, I have greatly enjoyed watching and photographing them. In the spirit of “For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People,” we fight to preserve nature and our national parks.



JEFF VANUGA | King Penguins, Salisbury Plain, South Georgia

SURVIVAL



Dheeraj Mali has been photographing leopard Neelam and her two cubs from Bera (Jawai Conservation Reserve, India) since they were born. One of the cubs, a female, appears to have a disability—one defective front leg/paw. Dheeraj believes that he is witnessing a cub who is adapting to life with a disability.



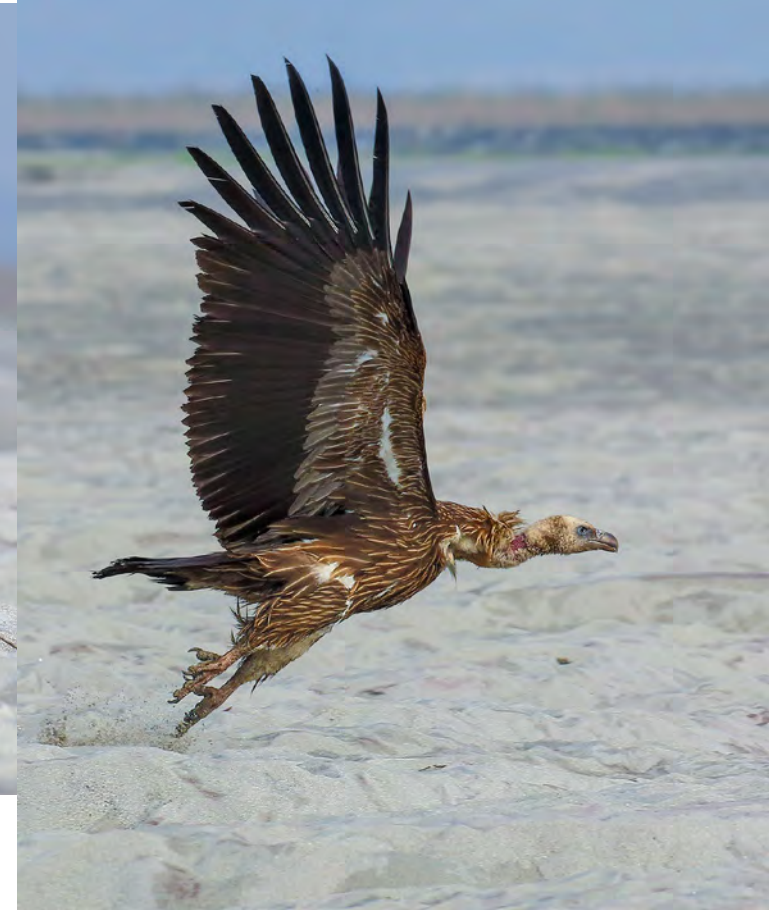
OF THE FITTEST

PHOTOS BY DHEERAJ MALI



CHRIS GARNER | Great Barrier Reef, Queensland, Australia

the VULTURE day of my birding life



STORY AND PHOTOS BY ARINDAM SAHA

On January 2019, I visited Gajoldoba, a small village in the Oodhlabari in the Jalpaiguri district of Dooars (West Bengal, India) region. It is situated in the southwestern Himalayan foothills, between the Mahananda river to the west and Teesta river to the east. It is famous for having the first reservoir formed by the Teesta Barrage which was built for irrigation. Gajoldoba is surrounded by the Baikunthapur forest and is a birding hotspot during winter. The location invites a large collection of ducks and other migratory birds from Ladakh and Central Asia.

My target for this visit was to photograph a special bird called the common merganser. The male common merganser is a lucrative species for any birder and it is, in my opinion, one of the most beautiful migratory ducks in India.

I started my birding trip on January 23, 2019, with a short boat ride with a local fisherman along the River Teesta. Within an hour, I was able to click the female common merganser. Unfortunately, no male was found that day. While searching for the male common merganser, I suddenly found some black spots above the Teesta riverbed. After close analysis with my binoculars, I found that those black spots were raptors and scavengers. Due to the distance, they were not visible to the naked eye.

It's difficult to explain in words how happy I was at this sighting. Every birder maintains a wish list of birds to be captured by their own lens. Though I have never considered myself as a dedicated birder, simply a nature lover, I always dream of capturing birds who are majestic and rarely found in India.

I can remember, in my childhood days, seeing these big birds around the city. But within the last 20 years, they have become critically endangered and now they are almost extinct. We moved the boat in the direction of the birds to get a closer view. After a few minutes, they became more and more prominent. We stopped our boat 200 meters from the site. I slowly crawled the rest of the path to move towards the birds without disturbing them. Eventually, I found seven Himalayan griffon vultures, one cinereous vulture and one steppe eagle. From every aspect, this collection was a birder's dream.

I spent almost two hours taking photos and trying different compositions. After the session, upon returning to my starting point, I found that my mobile phone had been damaged and that I had lost one of the memory cards from my trouser pocket while crawling through the sand. However, at the time, I was in seventh heaven and barely noticed.

As a nature lover I will always remember and be thankful for that day, the vulture day of my birding life.





ERIC YOUNGBLOOD | Red Fox, Anchorage, Alaska

Calling On Rangers

Photos &
Interview
by
Ranjan
Ramchandani



Chris Galliers – President, International Rangers Federation

There are over 100 associations of rangers worldwide. Do you expect these numbers to grow in the coming years?

Chris: I do, I think it will grow. But, I do feel that we need to ensure a balance and have good representation through various ranger associations. For the rangers to be able to have impact on the ground will come through well-supported and functioning ranger associations. For me, it is not only about how many ranger associations there are but also about how effectively they can provide support for, and work with, the rangers on the ground.

What were the main issues or what would you say would be the main takeaway from the conference?

Chris: : I would say the overriding one would be the global understanding of the role that rangers play. Also, making a tangible link between having effective rangers on the ground and appreciating the value they bring to the well-being and livelihood of the local culture. Coming out of a meeting right now, we came to an understanding that rangers are effectively safeguarding 20% of the globe, areas which have some of the most critical habitats on the planet. People should

Asia/Africa editor Ranjan Ramchandani interviews Chris Galliers, President of the International Rangers Federation and Atul Deodar, Assistant Conservator of Forest Anti-Poaching Unit, Pench Tiger Reserve in Nagpur, India at the World Ranger Conference held at Chitwan, Nepal in November 2019.

recognize that we should be giving recognition that is due to rangers for the role they play in wildlife preservation and also how we can help support them the most.

Keeping wildlife in mind, do you think that the increase in numbers of rangers or associations has impacted the numbers of wild animals in any way?

Chris: I think it is extremely difficult to say, but I am sure the increase is definitely of value. For example, ranger associations and gatherings, whether they are at a regional, continental or global level, allow for cross-border interaction. This is critical for species who cross international boundaries. There is a huge need for effective rangers on both sides of the borders where animals are moving so they are protected effectively in both nations.

What advice would you give a wildlife photographer on conduct in national parks? Could photographers and tourists help in reducing poaching?

Chris: I think photography has a very important role to play. With modern-day photography skills and the accessibility of good equipment, we can create a real enthusiasm and appreciation for wildlife through images that end up on social media. This occurs not just through a photograph of the species, but showing the species in its environment as well. Photos of an area can help to display the conservation management and bring viewers to a more realistic perspective of the area. We tend to look at the protected area and often ignore what is beyond the boundaries. I think photography is also a great medium for educating people about the challenges that poaching brings and offers both sides of the issue.

Do you think it is a challenge to preserve wildlife and cultural heritage when it pertains to an area where it puts wildlife at a great strain?

Chris: I think those two aspects have good synergies. You can manage the two together in a lot of cases. I think the real challenge is when you throw in economic development as part of that equation. So, safeguarding the cultural heritage must form part of our parks and the work of rangers as well. You know, we are working a lot with the indigenous rangers with that issue in various protected areas that are at risk. They are working at safeguarding biodiversity and cultural heritage as well; not an easy task to balance both.

Do you have a favourite wildlife species?

Chris: I have enjoyed all species of wildlife over time, but if I had to pick one, I would definitely say leopard. For me, they are more active than most cat species. They tend to be unpredictable, which is fascinating. They are beautiful cats and inhabit some visually stunning habitats. Their “secretiveness” makes them elusive and interesting to me.

There is a phrase I coined years ago after spending time and chatting with the Masai tribe – “From Hunter to Protector” What are your comments on this?

Chris: I think that’s fair enough. It is good to go from hunting to protecting. However, I think we must not get fixated with the hunting aspect of wildlife conservation. It’s very important to realize there are far greater threats than that: habitat loss is considered by many to be the greatest threat. You know the Masai is a great story, but when you start seeing the challenges they are facing in terms of their growing population within the protected areas, and additional challenges with development, we have got to be mindful that big infrastructure or development projects are very impactful to wildlife.

Thank you so much for having this conversation with me and I wish you success as the new President of the International Rangers Federation.



Atul Deodar, Assistant Conservator of Forest Anti-Poaching Unit, Pench Tiger Reserve

There are over 100 associations of rangers worldwide. Do you expect these numbers to grow in the coming years?

Atul: Yes! The numbers need to increase as there are many rangers who are yet to be organised. When this starts happening in areas where it needs to, they will come under a systematic sector and get proper training. The rangers will then have a voice, positive welfare and a platform. So, yes, I see the numbers going up in the future.

What were the main issues or what would you say would be the main takeaway from the conference?

Atul: At the World Ranger Congress I feel the main topic of discussion has been ranger welfare. The IRF is in touch with most of the ranger federations around the world, but all are still not under one umbrella. Once they get legal entity status, which should happen any time now, they will be able to act in a much more comprehensive way globally and not just in a few countries. Rangers would be able to work in a much more positive and better way in both Asia and Southeast Asia, where political systems differ. They could create a minimum basic standard for rangers worldwide, increasing the respect levels for the ranger cadre.

Keeping wildlife in mind, do you think that the increase in numbers of rangers or associations has impacted the numbers of wild animals in any way?

Atul: Yes, I think so. Once we get all rangers proper guidance and increase their professionalism, it will definitely help in maintaining and even increasing the numbers in declining species. For example, in anti-poaching activities, once an increased and well-trained task force is in place, it will help reduce the poaching of wildlife and also protect the rangers themselves against the poacher. This should increase species numbers. There are many things that can be done with the increase in the numbers of rangers with the support of the IRF platform.

What advice would you give a wildlife photographer on conduct in national parks? Could photographers and tourists help in reducing poaching?

Atul: We are all working towards one goal: to keep the wilderness going. Wildlife photography is very integral in keeping a check and balance of species. But if we don't maintain our distance, there is a good chance we could lose the "wildness" of the animal. For example, by disturbing an animal to get it to do something for a photograph, the photographer could potentially be taking some of the wild instinct out of the animal. Our sincere hope is that the recreational photographer who has no knowledge of animal behaviour should read up before venturing into a park. Another issue is the animal/human conflict in these areas. The photographer could possibly disturb an animal, take a photo and leave. But, the animal could recall the incident and take out its anger on another human as a result. It's sad that many photographers don't respect the animals as much as their need to get the photo. We appreciate the photographers, but would also ask that the photographers conduct themselves properly and obey the rules of the park and nature. Please be responsible in the parks!

Do you think it is a challenge to preserve wildlife and cultural heritage when it pertains to an area where it puts wildlife at a great strain?

Atul: The main challenge is to try and convince the communities that have been living in these areas, sometimes for many generations, to participate in our programs. They often want to do things in their own ways, which might be antiquated. It is possible that we need to transform their way of thinking. We are educating as per the laws and rules of the country, but also in localized communities. The main challenge is to find a meeting point whereby they understand what the ranger is saying could be for local advantage. There has to be education and communication for both the community and officers alike, so both can benefit from each other's experiences.

Do you have a favourite wildlife species?

Atul: Yes! Mine is the wild buffalo or the vulture.

I know this is a long topic for discussion, but in a few sentences what would you say would help against poaching?

Atul: In many cultures one looks at a criminal and condemns them, but when it comes to poachers, some societies respect them as "hunters". This needs to stop, as they are performing criminal acts. If we can change this, we have won half the battle. Education is another option. Until we educate the masses and the demand for animal products comes down, poaching is not going to stop. Unless they realise what a precious resource wildlife is, they won't stop the killing. There are so many things that need to be done, one could write a book. Nature education is as important as anti-poaching education. They go hand-in-hand. And, yes, we are slowly making headway, but we still need to do a lot more.

Thank you for your time and wish you the best with your new responsibilities with this promotion.



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PHOTOGRAPHER FEATURE

Karin van Zyl

Karin Van Zyl lives near Brits North West in South Africa and loves wildlife photography. She has been clicking her shutter for the past two years, after receiving a Pentax K5 as a gift. Karin loves the access to South Africa's beautiful parks such as Kruger and Pilanesberg. She enjoys shooting photographs alongside her son and tries to improve her skills with every image. Here is a sampling of Karin's African portfolio.





a
first
trip
to
Mara

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CAMERON LEE

Before my first trip to Africa, I did my utmost to be fully prepared. I had some anxiety because even though I was excited this was going to be my first trip to the “bush”. I honestly didn’t quite know what to expect, so I listened to the advice of my guide and wildlife photography coach Ranjan Ramchandani and followed his instructions. I also checked the Center for Disease Control Prevention website to review what medical precautions I needed to take and then talked this over with my doctor. I followed her advice also and took prescription medication for malaria and purchased some insect repellent. Ironically, this helped more with the flies that are prolific in the Masai Mara than it did to protect me from mosquitos.

Upon my arrival in Nairobi, the thing that hit me immediately were the cultural differences. As in other countries I have experienced, the people were very

open, friendly and welcoming. One of the biggest surprises for me on the way to the Mara was the fact that we went off-road for about 80 kilometers to get from the main road to the park. I didn’t know it at the time, but this was a prelude to the next week where we had extreme off-road driving between photo opportunities. I was also overwhelmed by the sheer size of the park and the number of animals; we were there during the annual migration. By the end of the week, we had traveled over so many bumps I had pain in some muscles I didn’t even know I had. Note to self: bring a memory foam cushion next time. One of the funniest moments of the trip was when a zebra was crossing the road and one of my truck mates said, “Hey, look, there is a zebra crossing. For those who don’t know, this is the UK term for a crosswalk.

My first impression of the camp we stayed at was quite good. It’s a bit like the “glamping” site I stayed in with my kids on the outskirts of Yellowstone National Park. There, I felt a bit exposed at the time due to the fact that bear and wolf ingress into the park was a possible threat. However in the Mara, in spite of the fact I woke my first morning to a lion calling to the rest of his pride, I never felt threatened. I had great confidence in our Masai protectors who escorted us within the camp after dark. I also felt secure inside the tent and did not have any major concerns for my safety.

My first safari was the afternoon we arrived at the camp. We went out for about four or five hours, until it got dark. The sunset that evening was one of the most spectacular I have ever seen and was accented by the fact there were elephants silhouetted against the backdrop of the orange glow of the setting sun. I was able to get a few good photographs the first evening, but quickly recognized how complicated my new camera was and how much of a challenge it is to take photographs of the wildlife. I never really understood how technical photography can be and how much you have to remember each time you transition from one photo opportunity to another. There are so many variables to consider and which setting on the camera is appropriate for each shot. Not to mention

that the animals don’t exactly wait for you to catch up to the action. My coach was very patient and I improved day by day.

At the end of the first afternoon I caught myself thinking, “Am I going to get bored doing this for 12 hours a day for the next week?” I couldn’t have been more wrong. First of all, I was with some great people in the safari vehicle, including the Masai guides who were all experts in the various animal behaviors and knew their habitats very well. If you are stuck in a confined space for that many hours, there is the potential to get on one another’s nerves. In our case, nothing could be further from the truth. The group defined diversity and the humor and kindness showed were genuine and warm. We also spent a lot of time together at mealtimes and in the evening. It just goes to show you that a diverse group with a common interest can come together and bond over the joy of mutual experiences.

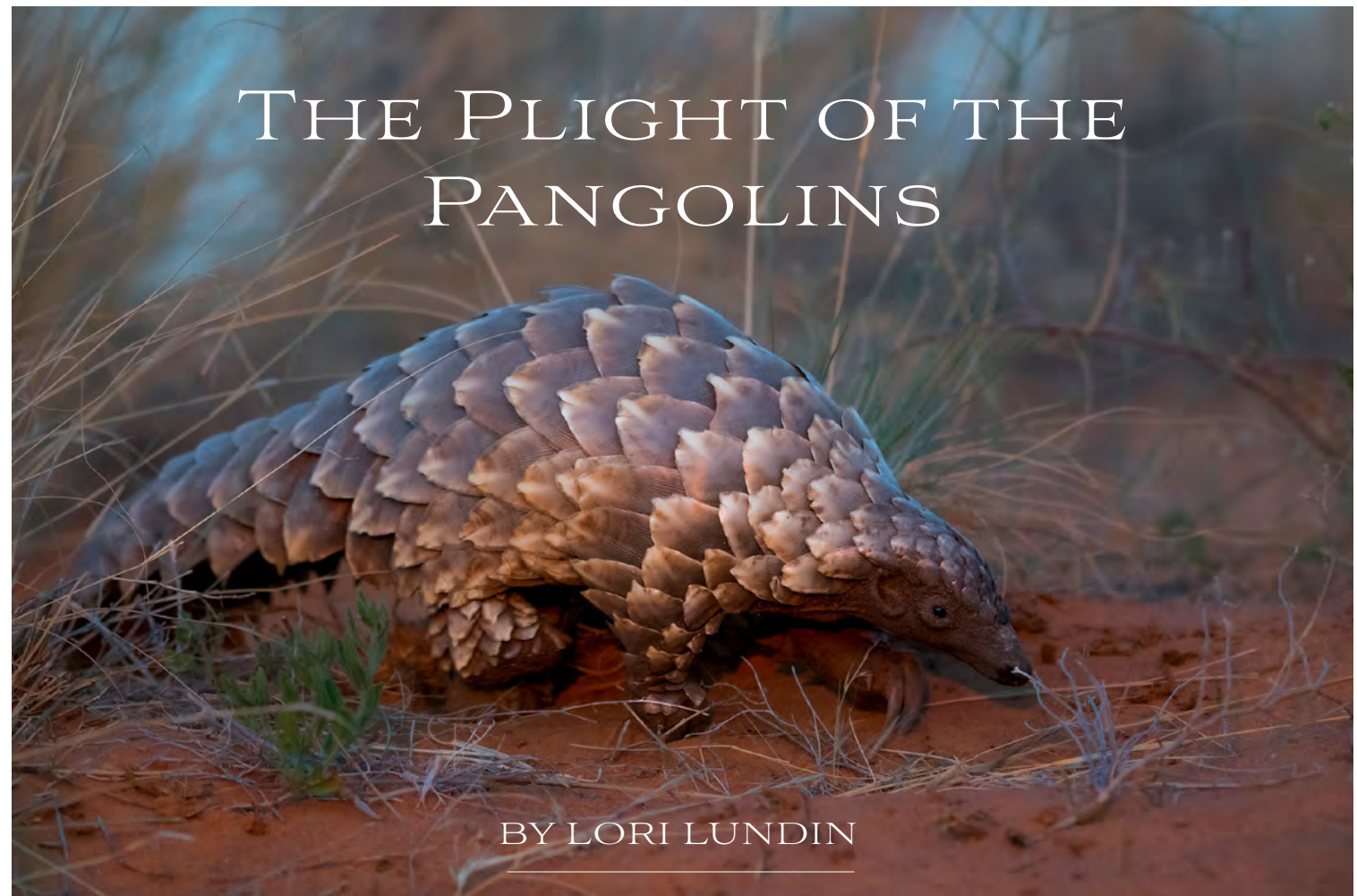
Over the next few days, I steadily learned more and more about the animals and watched them hunting and grazing. What inspired me the most as I watched through my lenses for hours on end, was the demonstration of profound love, especially in the lion prides. I saw lions being lions, expressing their well-earned reputation of being fierce and ferocious. However, when they are with their cubs they couldn’t



be more gentle and loving. I saw this as the purest love I had ever seen and it struck me that some humans could learn from them.

My only negative comment to make about this trip was the fact there were so many “day-trippers” that come to the Mara. Also, the fact that when there is action, it’s like a kid’s soccer game where everyone is at the ball. We waited all day for a hunt to start with a few other photographers and as soon as the action started it was chaos! Many vehicles would compete for the same shot. I learned that having a good guide can make all the difference in this situation. The key is to not necessarily be “on the action” but to predict what is going to happen next and get into position. That way you can get your photo before the rest of the crowd comes.

I fell in love with Mara and getting back into photography again as I prepare for retirement. I loved it so much that I have already booked for next year. This time I am bringing my teenage daughter who is also very interested in biology, evolution and photography. A few of my friends who saw some of the photos I sent them also signed up. So, now I am counting the days before I can go back. Hopefully, this time with the photography skills and knowledge to bring home the only trophies which are truly just: the photographs you got just right.



THE PLIGHT OF THE PANGOLINS

BY LORI LUNDIN

PHOTO BY KURT JAY BERTELS

They are the least known and most trafficked mammal on the planet. These prehistoric creatures have been on earth for 80 million years – but could be gone before most people even know they existed.

Pangolins look like reptiles but they are mammals – the only mammals in the world covered in keratin scales. Shy, reclusive and nocturnal, pangolins are rarely seen. They carry their offspring on their tail, swim long distances and roll up into a ball when they feel threatened. Tough on the outside and soft on the inside; can you relate? In this regard, they are not so different from us humans, who at times use our own armor to shield ourselves from perceived threats.

There are eight species of pangolin, all are listed as endangered. During their long time on this planet, pangolins have evolved with an ability to survive in a variety of diverse habitats ranging from tropical forests to barren deserts and impenetrable wetlands. They eat about 70 million insects a year and play a vital role in a complex ecosystem. But,, they are struggling to overcome the threat of human poaching. An estimated 100

thousand pangolins are being taken from their wild habitats in both Africa and Asia every year, numbers which are both staggering and unsustainable.

Peter Knights, CEO of Wild AID, an international organization working to reduce trade and consumption of wildlife products said that, in the past year, there have been multiple, massive seizures. “It’s been somewhat depressing and amazing the size of some of the seizures of pangolin scales because pangolins are very elusive. They are very hard to see. Most haven’t seen any of them, even people that live out in the wilds in Africa and guides and things have never seen a pangolin. They’re so very shy. And yet, somehow these traders are managing to get shipments of tons of them at a time, in some cases representing tens of thousands of pangolins in one seizure. So it’s very disturbing to see.”

Equally disturbing, he says these recent large seizures have uncovered another depressing trend. “The ivory traders, the people smuggling ivory internationally mainly to China and Vietnam, have now started mixing pangolin scales and ivory into the same shipments.

“It is hard to fathom that wildlife traffickers don’t understand that these animals are not an infinite commodity.”

I think one of the reasons [why these shipments of ivory are now mixed in with pangolin scales] is that China has banned all sales of ivory and that has helped reduce the price of ivory by about two thirds. We think these dealers are now supplementing because the ivory is not making enough money for them, they’re not getting enough volume anymore, so they are supplementing with these pangolin scales.”

It is no secret that wildlife trafficking is all about supply and demand. “Their keratin scales are used in traditional Chinese medicine for a whole variety of different ailments, so there is demand for them for that and their meat is eaten. It is seen as a delicacy in China and Vietnam,” said Knights. While all pangolins are now legally protected from international commercial trade, there is a major loophole in China where pangolin scales within China are still legal. “So if you can smuggle pangolin scales into China, you have the possibility of then legally selling them as that trade isn’t regulated right now.” Knights praises President Xi for taking the bold step of banning ivory. It has had a major impact on reducing ivory smuggling. “We’re hoping that China could also do the same with pangolin scales and stop that domestic market. That will help stop the international demand for pangolin scales.”

It is hard to fathom that wildlife traffickers don’t understand that these animals are not an infinite commodity. “I think sadly that many people that are supplying these pangolin parts in Africa are desperate financially and so if someone offers what is, to them, a large amount of money for taking a pangolin, they will literally go and take the last one until it’s done.”

“Obviously”, said Knights, “this is not a business with any sort of future sustainability. It’s just grab what you can while you can to try and make money off this animal which will ultimately cause an extinction and, of course, the extinction of the business they’re operating.”

Asian pangolins, particularly in China could be on the verge of being wiped out. “There are very few left. They

reproduce very slowly. It can take a couple years for a pangolin to have one baby. We know very little about them because they are so elusive, other than these huge numbers have been showing up in trade and they are becoming scarcer to find in the wild.” African pangolins are trafficked to meet demand in places like Laos, Vietnam, and China. Wildlife experts say it is close to impossible to breed or keep pangolins in captivity. Once they are taken from the wild, these animals become too stressed to eat or drink. A majority of them will die within a year.

But even with these grim reports, there are some positive developments. China announced it is stepping up its efforts to protect pangolins. Beginning on January 1, 2020, China’s national insurance will no longer cover medicines and products derived from pangolins and other threatened and endangered species. At least sixty drugs used in traditional medicine in China are made with pangolin scale derivatives. “China’s decision to exclude the highly endangered pangolin from government-insured traditional medicine is another vital step in reducing market channels for pangolin scales,” said Knights. “The next step would be a domestic sales ban, just as China has done so effectively to curb the illegal ivory trade.”

World Pangolin Day is February 15, 2020 and Knights’ message is simple. “Obviously in Asia – China and Vietnam in particular, please do not consume pangolin scales or meat. In fact, for the scales there are over 100 alternatives in traditional medicine. So there’s no need to have them in traditional medicine. And then, for the rest of the world, we need to help support pangolin conservation. Because you know many countries in Central Africa, for example, there’s no resources for the enforcement of this to happen. So we should cherish these animals. They are very cute things. They also fulfill a really important role in eating termites and other insects which can often damage crops. If we want to save them, we’ve got to do something about it very soon.”

For more on how you can help, visit: www.wildaid.org.

PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOPS IN THE WILD

Join our photo workshops at Masai Mara in 2020 led by a published and award-winning photographer, Ranjan Ramchandani. He is an Olympus visionary and has over a decade of experience in the Mara. He will share his tips and also guide you personally while on safari.

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Group 1 : 4 persons SOLD OUT
Group 2 : 4 persons SOLD OUT
Group 3 : 5 persons SOLD OUT

August 11th to August 17th

Group 1 : 4 persons
Group 2 : 4 persons

July 9th to July 15th

Group 1 : 4 persons
Group 2 : 4 persons

July 24th to July 29th

Group 1 : 5 persons SOLD OUT
Group 2 : 5 persons SOLD OUT

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Group 1 : 4 persons
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Group 1 : 4 persons SOLD OUT
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