

INTERNATIONAL WOLF

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Pictured: the painted “wolves” of Africa—actually, wild dogs that share many behaviors with wolves and are similarly endangered. [PAGE 27](#)

with great surprise I realized what
I was looking at; six sets of
eyes were staring back at me, only
100 feet away. And then, I heard
a muffled half-bark followed by
a deep, smooth, heavy sound rising
into the air. None of the other

PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

Acts Like a Wolf, Misunderstood Like a Wolf—and Barely Surviving, a World Apart

Text by Nancy Gibson • Photos by Nicholas Dyer

I watch the silhouettes dashing across the tall grasses and think: *This could be a pack of wolves chasing elk in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park.* Instead, I am bouncing along in a jeep at dusk in Botswana, Africa. The animals weaving and darting in pursuit of an impala are wild canines, creatures with multiple names—African wild dogs, Cape hunting dogs, painted dogs and most recently, painted wolves. Despite all the monikers, *Lycaon pictus*, share a distant, common ancestor and many

behaviors with *Canis lupus*—wolves.

There is one obvious exception, and “painted wolves” provides a hint. They are costumed in patches of white, black, brown, gray and everything in between. Their large, round ears are reminiscent of Disney’s famed Mickey Mouse character. (Many African animals have large ears to radiate excess heat from their bodies.) This distinctive pelage allows researchers to easily identify each individual. The only consistency is the white tassel at the end of the tail. Closer inspection reveals four toes but no dew claw or thumb, making *L. pictus* unique in the canid family. Both species are long-legged, but adult gray wolves are larger than their African cousins that weigh between 44 and 66 pounds.

Even though the two species live on different continents, they share the same survival tools and denning behaviors. Painted “wolves” are mainly led by the breeding pair, but the female takes significant rank with hunting and pack management.

I was riveted when I saw my first painted “wolf” den in Moremi Camp, Botswana in

1994. There were 17 seven- or eight-week-old pups inside! It was puppy chaos when the adults returned with leftovers in their bellies. The begging for food by mobbing, licking, tumbling pups was short but intense. The yearlings pampered and played with the pups while older “wolves” surrounded the site like sentries to alert members of any imminent attack by lions, leopards or hyenas—all of which are a constant, deadly threat to helpless pups. The pack was incredibly tolerant of our clicking cameras and whispering voices as we tried to contain our excitement. I became expert at watching pups sleep in a pile for three days, but the raucous spurts of play made the memories. Overhead, vultures lurked in trees awaiting their duty as “nature’s clean-up crew” by devouring pup scats and food remnants. All quite tidy.

As Dr. L. David Mech wrote in his 1975 paper about the hunting strategy of these two social canids, “they stand out in occupying similar ecologi-



cal niches...nevertheless both the wolf and the hunting dog face the same problem: securing a livelihood by preying on large ungulates.”

New research states that most painted “wolf” packs need at least six members to hunt and reproduce successfully although like wolves, some smaller groups can survive. New data suggests the average adult needs nine pounds of



painted “wolves” quickly transitioned to stalking their prey. Once near, they erupted at full speed, expertly sorting out the most vulnerable antelope. Success!

Unlike wolves, which catch a breath of rest after their prey falls, these painted “wolves” burst into a feeding frenzy. One grabbed a chunk of food and retreated 15 feet, looking out for hyenas and lions. They took turns scarfing what they could, but when nightfall arrived, so did the hyenas. A guttural alarm call resonated



food daily. Medium-sized antelopes like impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) and kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) are their main food source.

Painted “wolves” are crepuscular hunters (active at dawn and dusk)—to my advantage as I watched the hunt that memorable evening in Botswana. I couldn’t hear their excited communication but saw their exuberant movements and their round ears turning like disks in all directions. Eager noses, slightly smaller than a wolf’s, sniffed the air. As their keen eyesight captured the slight movement of impalas cautiously grazing at the edge of a scrubby forest, the

a warning, but the ferocious fight for the carcass was instantaneous. Teeth gnashing, squeals and a cacophony of brutal sounds filled the night—the savage turmoil of survival. I returned at daylight thankful

not to see a dead painted “wolf.” The bent grasses and smears of blood were the only evidence of last night’s struggle. Competition for food is intense in Africa.

By three months of age, pups graduate to their nomadic stage, moving with the pack at dawn, scouting for prey. In late afternoon, a babysitter is assigned and a safe location is secured for the pups. The predator-and-prey theatre begins once more at dusk. Strong bonds form among the pups, especially among same-sex siblings. By age three, brothers will link together as they disperse in small groups. The pattern is similar for sisters around age two. Leaving in

small groups provides some security when trying to attract a new pack with unrelated siblings. This is a good but challenging plan, as forming new territories is fraught with snaring and other prevalent human hazards.

I repeatedly return to Africa with one goal: to see more painted “wolves.” June 2018 took me to Zimbabwe. I met award-winning photographer Nicholas Dyer, who visited the International Wolf Center in late winter 2018 and detailed for staff the similarities between our gray wolves and the painted “wolves.” His enthusiasm and stunning photographs of painted “wolves” sparked a return visit to Africa.

Africa is full of varied landscapes, but Mana Pools National Park in Northern Zimbabwe, where I camped, is serene and captivating in its remoteness, far-flung savannas and wildlife. It borders the Zambezi River with views of the neighboring Zambian foothills to the north.

I prefer basic camping tents, fully open to the sounds and activity of wildlife, versus semi-insulated lodges, and on that trip it was the right choice. The river is home to hippos during the day, but our camp was clearly on the trail for night grazing. Elephants plucking ripe tree-fruit in camp were commonplace, and included a curious bull that surveyed our tent. Grazing antelope chose the protection of camp during the day, but the hyenas and lions came at nightfall—often together.

Painted “wolves” typically den in June, so our search for the pack began. We knew that the Nyamatusi pack was sometimes spotted along the Churuwe River valley. The river bed is dry in summer, and thick sand made for arduous hiking. Additionally, we saw the tracks of numerous lions, leopards, hyenas and dangerous Cape buffalos crisscrossing the sand. The guide carried a gun for safety as we searched the valley. My instincts piqued with each venture into the thick scrub and tall grasses.

While painted “wolf” tracks were prevalent, there was no obvious trail to the den. But after trekking four kilometers, we spotted a well-worn path up a short ridge that landed us nearly next to the pack’s deep den with five pups. A

glance to the right showed three adult animals hiding in the grass and one male standing his ground. I snapped a quick photo and then fled to avoid intrusion.

I later learned that the brave painted “wolf” distinguishable by his black shoulder pattern was named Tequila. He was one of six brothers who dispersed from their pack in 2015, met up with six sisters and formed the Nyamatusi Pack. Unfortunately, Tequila was likely killed by lions shortly after my encounter. Most of the pack, however, remains intact, and most of the attached photos are of his former pack.

Painted “wolves” produce a repertoire of sounds. Their twittering sound is like a bird call, but it indicates excitement, whether anticipating food, making a greeting or prepping for a hunt. Instead of howling, painted “wolves” emit a chorus of gentle “hooing” when searching for pack mates. The explosive alarm call is used for intruders. Their whines and head-lowering in submission are similar to wolf behavior.

The fortunes of wolves on all continents are subject to fearsome constructs of our own myths. The painted “wolves” are no different. Although livestock losses are rare, they are treated like vermin, often unintentionally trapped in deadly snares designed for bushmeat, poisoned in dens and killed on the roads. Rabies, distemper and other diseases are spread

by domestic dogs. Once abundant south of the Sahara Desert, they exist only in protected areas. They are likely the most persecuted predator, challenged by intense competition from other predators inside the parks and humans outside the parks. Their population is just 6,500 animals.

This Zimbabwean adventure ended at the Painted Dog Conservation’s center of operations, just outside Hwange National Park. The structure resembles a large, beautiful hut, and inside are engaging education exhibits. Led by its charismatic director, Peter Blinston, it employs 62 passionate staff of which 16 are anti-poaching patrollers. The center comprises more than 150 acres, an expansive “wolf” exhibit topped with a visitor walkway, and a rehab center for recovering, wild painted “wolves.” Local school children stay several nights there in dorms, eager to spend days learning about painted “wolves” and other native wildlife. The center’s efforts are not unlike ours at the International Wolf Center, and their younger generation holds the key to painted “wolf” survival.

When it was time to leave, Peter took me to see if any of the Destiny Pack members had returned to the nearby den. Outfitted with telemetry, we patiently waited, and once again, luck was on

my side. Peering through thick brush, I saw first-time-mother Lucy returning. We tried to count pups as they were bursting out of the den. We estimated 10 pups—not an unusual number—in the flurry of bouncing youngsters ready to eat and anxious adults ready to play.

Sadly, none of those pups survived. In the fall of 2018, just as the pups were old enough to travel, a pride of 17 lions tracked the pack for three days killing the pups and one adult collared male. Three collared painted “wolves” have returned to the den area, but with their diminished pack numbers, survival is unlikely. While odds are poor for this species in general, sufficient habitat nourished by education and tolerance could easily change their fortunes. Their fate is inevitably tied to human efforts.

For more information, check out www.paintedwolf.org, where you can see pack updates and buy the new stunning book *Painted Wolves, A Wild Dog’s Life* by Peter Blinston and Nicholas Dyer, whose photos are featured with this story. ■

Nancy Gibson is the co-founder of the International Wolf Center and serves on its board of directors.

