

A mixed bag: happy endings and heartache

2011 saw continuation of the sustained poaching onslaught on rhino populations in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT) has continued to provide technical and management support for rhino populations in the south east Lowveld of Zimbabwe, where well over 80% of the country's remaining rhino now reside.

Chap Masterson | Rhino Veterinarian for Africa, Lowveld Rhino Trust/International Rhino Foundation

Aside from the usual annual rhino darting operations for management purposes, in which a total of some 70 animals were darted, primarily to positively mark rhino for individual identification and so facilitate population monitoring at the individual level, the ongoing poaching challenge necessitated several veterinary interventions, by either myself or Dr Chris Foggin of the Wildlife Veterinary Unit, to treat animals wounded to various degrees by bullets or wire snares or to capture calves orphaned by poaching events.

All such interventions undertaken on Save Valley Conservancy, Bubye Valley Conservancy and Chipinge Safari Area were funded by LRT and were greatly facilitated by the new LRT veterinary Toyota Landcruiser purchased with a grant from USFWS. The successful grant application for

black rhino bull 'Maduma', shot five times, traumatically dehorned and left for dead. Obviously one of the bullets, presumably the one that hit the angle of his jaw, knocked him unconscious enabling the poachers to cut off his horns – severely mutilating his face in the process – before making good their escape. The bull, however, was made of tougher stuff and upon regaining consciousness was found stumbling around with severe injuries and blood loss. His pluck and resilience as well as his ability to feed and drink tipped the decision towards attempting a treatment

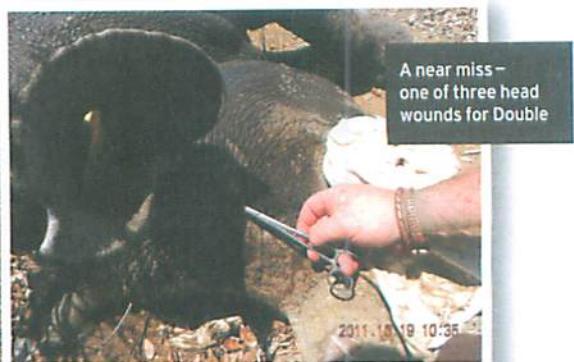
Of 25 bullet casings found at the scene, 7 were found to have hit 'Double' and one hit 'Trouble'

ALL PICS LOWVELD RHINO TRUST



this vehicle was submitted by Save the Rhino International (SRI) whom LRT owes a debt of gratitude for their support not only for assistance in the acquisition of this vehicle but also for their valuable participation and support for LRT initiatives as well as for other rhino conservation efforts in the sub-region.

As with all such attempts to save victims of poaching, the treatment outcomes were a mixed bag of happy endings and deep heartache. On the one hand, we had the case of the



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rather than euthanasia. He did very well for over a month before what must have been a hairline crack in his shoulder blade – caused by one of the bullets – gave way and I was left with no choice but to euthanize him; the heart-wrenching irony being that his ghastly facial wounds had all but healed by that time.

As sad as the loss of Maduma was, we can thankfully report that all other animals treated for various wounds had happier endings. The most encouraging of these was the case of the black rhino cow 'Double' and her bull calf 'Trouble' ambushed by poachers on their way to water on Save Valley Conservancy late one afternoon in October. Of 25 bullet casings found at the scene, fired from AK-47 assault rifles, seven were found to have hit the cow, some in very compromising positions, including three in the head, two in the left foreleg, one in the left knee and one high in her rump, with her calf having taken a

Volunteer with Dambari Wildlife Trust

bullet in his left front knee. Due to the relentless and dedicated tracking efforts of the LRT monitoring scouts in difficult terrain, enduring unbearably hot conditions, it was possible to treat the animals timely and all their wounds responded well to the early medical intervention.

Two orphans were retrieved after their mothers were killed by poachers, one from Bubye Valley, the other from Save Valley Conservancy. The first of these, a 10-month-old bull calf 'Be-Brave', earned his name standing vigil by the carcass of his poached mother despite the attentions of a pride of lions intent on scavenging and perhaps indulging themselves in some fresh rhino calf – judging from claw marks found on the young rhino's back when he was captured for bottle-feeding a few days later. Both calves were delivered into the capable and loving care of Katrina and Blondie Leatham and their rhino assistant Enos, of Bubye Valley Conservancy, who are all too familiar with raising orphaned rhino, but who do so with selfless dedication.

Lowveld Rhino Trust also provided support and veterinary services, in conjunction with SAVE Australia, Dambari Wildlife Trust and the Wildlife Veterinary Unit, for rhino darting operations, to dehorn, ear notch and implant VHF transmitters, in intensive protection zones (IPZs) in Hwange and Matopos National Parks. In addition, as LRT veterinarian, I was privileged to be made available as additional wildlife veterinary capacity in support of Dr Chris Foggin, a long-time partner of LRT and legend in rhino conservation in Zimbabwe.

On a personal level, having made the rather daunting move to return to my homeland, Zimbabwe, with a young family, and despite the trials and challenges that this entails, I can safely say, a year later, that I could not imagine being anywhere else other than right here, privileged to be a member of a dedicated team determined to secure the future of our beleaguered rhino populations. In this regard LRT is enormously grateful to all our supporters, donors and partner institutions enabling continuation of our work.

Do you sometimes get fed-up with working in the city; being surrounded by people, buildings, traffic? My office window overlooks sun-drenched grassland, busy with birds and insects, and occasionally I glimpse two magnificent kudu bulls!

Adele Edwards | Logistics Manager, Dambari Wildlife Trust

While my work environment at Dambari is wonderful, there's rarely time to appreciate it. Development, administration and fundraising for the 50-acre field station, and Dambari's various research and conservation projects, falls onto the shoulders of just three staff.

Last year we were fortunate to have four people volunteer at Dambari, which made us realise what a boon an extra pair of willing hands could be. An MSc graduate reviewed and collated a backlog of research data, and we received invaluable assistance from SRI's Cath Lawson, Cathy Dean and Cathy's husband Kenneth Donaldson. Not only did they help with many office tasks but they were also great for our planning and ideas sessions. Their advice and enthusiasm encouraged us to explore a paying volunteer scheme to earn critical funding to support our field station base, and we are looking forward to hosting our first guest in June.

Primarily a research and conservation Trust, we can take two to four visitors at a time. Volunteer activities might include (dependent on timetables):

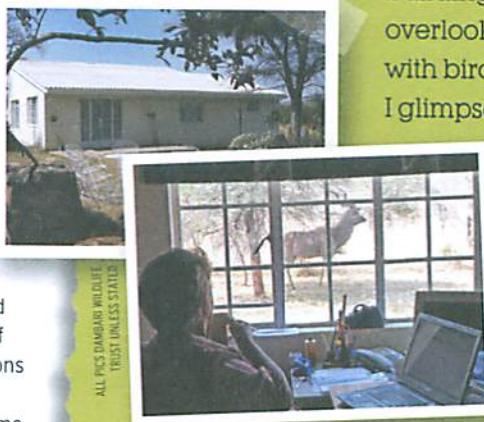
- Fieldwork in the Matobo Hills World Heritage Site: assisting researchers with data collection and entry for biodiversity projects
- Developing and distributing environmental educational materials for rural schools
- Helping out with office/station-based tasks and sharing skills with staff

Those who choose to spend a fortnight volunteering with Dambari Wildlife Trust can enjoy a unique opportunity to work in small groups 'behind the scenes' in a beautiful setting... and your contribution will impact practical conservation directly!

For more information about the Trust visit www.dambari.com or to enquire about being a paying volunteer, email admin@dambari.com

Grants

Our thanks to Kenneth Donaldson and Cath Lawson, who made donations totaling £1,850 towards the core costs of DWT.



The beautiful landscape at Dambari

