

Thuma Telegraph

Sept 2011

Wildlife Action Group



Dear All

Things here move so fast the days are rolling into one. Malawi is undergoing some challenges and we have had rioting on the streets in most major cities and the fuel shortage continues. We along with everyone who owns a car and those who don't (black market people) spend hours queuing for fuel. Tempers are raw and people push in front causing many fights, it is chaos! I have become very good at revving the car and nudging forward and even have "the glare" down to a tee, daring anyone to try push in front of me! ☺ The cost of most goods have increased somewhat and people are really struggling. What happens outside the reserves is reflected inside and poaching is high and we have our jobs cut out for us.

We have done many overnight patrols and always seem to be just one step behind our poachers. One morning we were hot on the trail on a man who had killed a bush pig. We followed him into the village only to see him pop on a bike and cycle away! But our day will come and we will catch him.

We arrested 3 charcoal poachers over the last few months. One arrest was made on an overnight ambush with the Salima police who have been a great support especially the new Station officer Mr Foster Mangani. Out of the 3 arrests only two made it to court. One has been released as it is his first offence and the other we are waiting to hear about. This is the second time we caught him inside the reserve burning charcoal so we hope for a good result which will also serve as a warning to others. Fingers crossed.

Best regards

Lynn Clifford



SNARES SNARES AND MORE SNARES!

Over The last two months we have recovered so many snares from along the streams in Thuma Forest. In one day we retrieved over 60 snares!

This month we found a dead kudu. She died a slow and painful death in the sun caught by a wire snare.

On Thursday 25th we found a snare right outside the porcupines den. I have been told that people sometimes use these for black magic! We removed it.

On Sunday the 28th Aug the scouts went out on patrol and approx one hour later I got a call to say they found a baboon caught in a snare and he was still alive! They estimated he had been there 24 hours! They said they could not release him as it was very dangerous and maybe it was best to kill him. I asked them not to and that I would come meet them to access the situation. I quickly gathered some things that might help us release the animal and headed out into the bush. Two scouts came to meet me half way and escorted me to the site. The poor baboon was a big healthy male, still very strong and alert but really traumatized. He was very thirsty and his hands and feet were bleeding where he had been trying to release himself. His teeth were bigger than my index finger and could do some serious damage. He was caught by a thick wire



around the waist and had wrapped himself around the tree so it was almost impossible to release him. We tried to calm him down so we could see exactly where and what he was attached to and how we could try cut the wire. I had brought a sheet so we could use it to secure his head and upper body. We decided we would try. We made another snare which we put around his head (it was the only way we

could ensure on one got hurt, seems cruel but it was our only way) and then quickly wrapped his upper body in the sheet, securing his head and hands and held it tight so he could not grab one of us. Then I and one scout cut the snare with a panga knife and untied the snare which was wrapped around the tree several times. Once we had done this we loosened the wire and sheet and he scampered away. He was very weak and didn't go far at first but after some time he seemed to get his bearing and ran away. We were all very pleased with ourselves. This baboon was lucky and will live to see another day.

As we carried on we found 7 more snares in the same area which we removed.

This form of poaching is very painful and terrifying for any animal. They can be caught around the waist or their legs or even neck! Once caught they suffer in the African sun without food or water sometimes for days! It is so cruel. This is obviously the work of a new poacher or group of poachers as we have not encountered as many snares here. WAG scouts have started over night patrols in this area to try catch this person. Will let you know how we get on.

DONATIONS FROM OUR FRIENDS IN SWITZERLAND

We were lucky enough to have a young volunteer from Switzerland arrive in July. Alex Von Waldkrich is an extraordinary young man training to be an electrician and also qualified welder! Within 5 minutes of arriving in Thuma had started assessing what needed to be done and then started doing it. He worked tirelessly rewiring the very old lighting system that did not work, fixing doors and locks, checking our solar system and panels. He also did some training with the scouts on how to wire up electrics in a safe and professional manner which they were really happy about. He helped to build and design new showers and toilets. He also did lots of patrols and was involved in several arrests. Alex is a part time fire fighter back home in his village of Wattwil, St Gallen. Alex is a remarkable person with such a strong work ethic who also has such good practical mental and physical skills and WAG would like to thank him for all his hard work and dedication while with us. Alex has promised to come back again next year which we are delighted with.:

Alex and his Mother Pla have been actively seeking donations for WAG from their local area and we received some items which I have listed below and we have been told there are many more things coming including hand knitted socks for the scouts that have been made by local elderly ladies! How amazing is that?!:) Please see some photos of the items we kindly received from various donors. Thank you very much these items are invaluable and will help us with our work.



Tool box



two great cameras



Hand crafted bush knives



Knife sharpener great for all pangas and knives

BIRDS AND OTHER ANIMALS

We are slowly but surely building up a good portfolio of photos of different animals found in both reserves. Due to lack of books and internet access sometime we do not know the names of the animals so from time to time we will put photos up but may need assistance from some of you to help us identify what they are please.

Last issue I incorrectly named a bird and mislead you all. I am sorry for that. The bird in question is a Red Headed Weaver not a Bishop.

In Aug while out on patrol we had two volunteers from the UK called Sophie and Morgan, both are keen wildlife enthusiasts and conversationalist.



Sophie has a great eye and spotted this heron. We think this bird has not been seen here before or at least has not been listed in the Thuma Bird List. (See photo to left). We think it is a Squacco Heron but it could also be a Malagasy Heron (if it is the second then it is extremely rear!!) If anyone can confirm what this is we would be most grateful please.

Other animals we spotted in August were this beautiful python! This photo was taken by Morgan while on patrol.



Sophie and I did a few hours down by the swimming pool and tried to photo some of the wonderful dragon flies and other insects. Again we do not have any books to identify what they are so if anyone knows any from these photos please let me know.

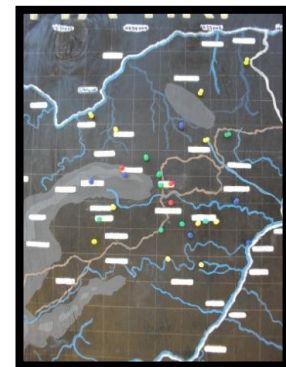


ELEPHANT IDENTIFICATION STARTED

We have for some time now wanted to start identifying our elephant population. This will enable us to understand their movements and interactions with each other and also makes it a lot more interesting for us. As it is the dry seasons it is a bit easier to see clearly and to watch the elephants. All patrols are logged on GPS and we also have started mapping each elephant sighting on our map board by month.

But this is no easy job. Our elephants are not used to people and do not like us to get too close nor do they like cars. It is not like the larger reserves where the car pulls up beside a herd and they allow you to take photos. We are on foot and the terrain is difficult and it can be very dangerous.

Besides that it is important that we respect their space and do not disturb them. This is their place, their sanctuary and they must be allowed “to be”. Saying that we have managed to identify some of them! And we have started keeping records of their movements and taking photos. So we are happy to share and introduce you to some of them.



Our first elephant is already known to you. He was mentioned in a news letter before “tuskless”! Well it’s not a great name for this old friend so we have given him a name of a great well known African chief “Chaka”. Chaka is a real character who seems to be a calm one. He comes around camp allot and allows us to watch him from close quarters and seems relaxed around us. He has also been spotted over near our camp in Dedza in July. He wanders alone but sometimes he has younger males with him. So far we have seen him with “Donald” (who I will introduce you to in a minute) and also “Yammy”.



1. Chaka pushing down a tree near base camp



2. Chaka having a dust bath

Our second elephant is “Ya mphamvu” – meaning “strong one” in local language or Yammy for short! He is a male, estimated age to be around 20 years old. We can recognise him by a large notch missing from his left ear and his tusks are pretty white. He does not allow us too close but



shows no sign of aggression towards us, he just moves away.

Next is “Donald”. Approx age 24 years old. He is bigger than Yammy and his tusk a yellowish tint and more pointed. He also has a large what looks like abscess or old wound just behind his ear on his right shoulder.



We also have two groups called A and B for now. These are groups we keep seeing around and about. Once we can make out exact identification marks them we will give them names. So for now we have Group A. This comprises of 2 females and a calf. We have sighted them on the 9th Aug near ToboTobo, on 10th Aug sighted from camp, 23rd Aug near Buffalo view; we think one of the females has her right tusk missing but need to confirm that! and again on 28th Aug near camp again.



Group A

Group B – comprises of 8 elephants – 6 females and 2 calves. One female was walking at the back and limping. She had a calf walking close to her. The herd walked ahead of her and then stopped to wait for her. We spotted them 14th Aug walking down on the newly opened Linthipe road, obviously going to drink.

We have lots of work to do on this and it is a learning curve for us all but it is very exciting and interesting for us all.

Will keep you updated.

Everyday Heros by Sophie Brown

The sun streamed through the window of my little mud house, just after 5.45 a.m. I could hear the gentle “peeping” of a hornbill, and chattering of starlings and I wondered what today would bring. Africa has a way of surprising you, no matter what you had planned!

I was up and out of bed and out to the “water pump rock” to brush my teeth – with a fabulous view of the forest, before heading up to the top of camp, to help with breakfast. Blue and orange lizards (still need to identify them - I think they may be common flat lizards) lay out on rocks, warming their blood in the morning sunshine, to kick start their day. Lynn was already up and breakfast was well underway. Lynn’s breakfasts have a reputation for setting you up for the day - eggs, toast and tomatoes, washed down with Malawian tea.

The view from the breakfast table at Thuma is amazing, and as the morning light changed with each passing minute the colours of the forest glowed in turn, and the morning mist slowly lifted from the tree canopy. An African Harrier Hawk was hunting in the trees in front of us, only his enormous wing span flitting through the trees gave him away, and the ominous silence from the

other birds as they went into hiding. The resident Hyrax family, peeked out of their rocky home, ever hopeful that a small piece of toast might be spared... or even a tomato.

It was then time to get boots on, fill up water bottles, grab cameras and binoculars and meet up with the scouts to head out for a hike.

The walking around Thuma is beautiful, although the terrain and rising temperature is challenging. My advice to any other volunteers planning to come out, is to get as fit as possible before you arrive!

Walking in line and in silence, we headed out, hoping to see Elephants, but delighted to see any wildlife on the way. On this particular morning we saw signs of hyena, a family of Warthogs, and the scouts pointed out a variety of foot prints and droppings, from porcupine to mongoose. Suddenly the scouts stood still. I had heard nothing other than our feet gently scrunching on the dry leaves under foot. Their well-trained ears had picked out Elephants - not far from where we were. This was signaled by a series of clicking noises from the first scout in the line, in turn, all the way down to the last. Again we stood in silence. There was a whisper, "Njovu." (for my benefit!) Elephant. Hand signals from a few scouts all pointed towards the north. Oliver picked up some soil and threw it into the air, watching it fall away behind us, in the gentle breeze. We were downwind. In silence, following hand signals we looped around keeping downwind, until we were facing a sloping hillside covered in miombe trees. I stared and stared, Elephants are huge, why couldn't I see them? I couldn't hear them either. "Where?" I whispered in frustration... "There!" pointed Oliver.... It is amazing how these enormous mammals can just blend and disappear into the forest. After a few seconds focusing, I saw them. 2 females and a calf. We stood and watched. I was torn as to whether I should be clicking with the camera or just watching them, when suddenly the wind changed direction. Trunks went up, scenting the air, ears came out, and with an indignant trumpet they were off into thicker cover. It was my first truly wild elephant sighting, and I was on foot! Fantastic! On the way back, the scouts pointed out weaver bird nests, and native bird life. We arrived back at camp, after 3 and half hours, very,very hot, and thirsty. The bush shower was never so appealing! There is something about looking out over the forest while you shower, that is quite magical.



Over the next week or so, we worked with Lynn to start building id sheets for the local population, which is estimated to be around 200 individuals. We recorded groups, the number in the groups, and started to identify individuals within groups, by tusk size, colour and shape, as well as any other notable markings, such as scars or tears in the ear flaps. We even got to give a couple names!



In the evenings we would sit up on the top rock and watch the sun set over the forest. We would cook our super over an open fire, and listen to the rustles in the bush around us. As we drifted off to sleep at night we would hear Hyenas calling around us. They sounded close, but noise can travel quite far in the forest. We felt safe knowing that "Trevor" the Baboon Spider, was "on guard" every night outside our door. We became very fond of him.

I have never done "bush camp" living before, but I quickly adapted. Some lessons you learn the hard way - like don't leave food out in the kitchen, because Mr Greedy the resident Vervet monkey (quite a character) and his

sidekick, "Piglet" regularly raid the kitchen, demolishing anything in sight, in seconds.... I have attached some pictures of Mr Greedy and Piglet, sharing my birthday cake mixture, when I had left the washing up out for more than 5 minutes! I gave up trying to keep my feet clean, and surrendered to the fact the dust gets everywhere!

We set up a motion camera outside the scouts camp, as Mr Blacks said a porcupine came round at night looking for food scraps. Sure enough, in the morning we uploaded the memory card to the laptop and saw that more than 1 porcupine came in the night over a period of 5 hours.

Both Morgan and I had birthdays while we were at camp, and Lynn arranged a brilliant party for us. It was a very memorable evening, spent with all the scouts and camp staff, (with a few drinks ;0)) sharing stories around a fire, and learning about different cultures, practicing a bit of local language, followed by some dancing, of course! I will never forget the image of 5 tough Malawian scouts dancing with us to Dolly Parton - 9 to 5.... Played from my ipod!

The next day it was back to work, serious work, as the scouts got themselves ready to go off on an overnight patrol. They were heading out towards Chilombo, hoping to catch some notorious



poachers from that area. The Thuma scouts are so brave. Unarmed, their only communication with base camp is a mobile phone with intermittent reception. Arrests over the past year have increased, as funding has allowed more scouts to be employed. They are now able to patrol 25 consecutive days in the month and the results are really starting to show. Poachers come into the reserve for a variety of illegal activities, from deforestation - such as charcoal burning and collecting building materials to bush meat poaching, which is anything from setting snares, digging pit traps and shooting at animals with

homemade guns and bullets. The work of the Thuma team is relentless. They are fearless and tireless for their cause. It is very humbling.

I learnt many things during my stay at Thuma. Things that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I made good friends. One of the things I learned was that conservation on this scale can't happen over-night. Every day is another battle, and another small step forward. Every snare that is removed is one less animal that will die a slow and painful death. You can't help but want things to move quicker, to change more rapidly, but it won't. The Thuma Team has turned a corner, they will win this fight. The scouts taught me a Chichewa saying which is "Pang'o Pang'o," which means "little by little" and this is exactly how life is for them. Never ever give up guys.... your work is worthwhile, and it is making a difference.

If you would like any more details on volunteering at Thuma, please do not hesitate to get in contact. I am happy to answer any questions from a volunteering prospective.

ACTIVITY REPORT

Patrol Activity Report	Apr	May	June	July	Aug
number of times patrolled:	20	21	18	27	29
Total illegal Charcoal activity	0	4	10	4	7
Total illegal bamboo activity	2	1	0	5	8
Total illegal general deforestation activity*	5	0	3	5	9
Total illegal snare activity	1	9	15	165	21
Total miscellaneous illegal activity**	2	0	0	1	0

Total Elephant poaching activity	0	0	1	0	1
Total illegal hunting/poaching activity	11	2	2	14	12
Total Ele - Human Conflict activity	2	1	0	1	0
Grand total for illegal activity	21	16	31	194	58

* firewood collecting without permit, plank cutting, confiscated pangas, axe, hoe etc

** mushrooms, honey, fishing

A special thank you to

PUMA – WENGER for the beautiful handcrafted knives

ISTOR for the sharpeners

KRAFTWERK for the tool box

Pen Knives and cameras also received

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The Wildlife Action Group (WAG) is registered in Malawi as a non-governmental, non-profit Organization since 1994.

Its main objectives are to protect Malawi's wildlife and environment, and to assist and support the Malawi government in the protection of areas like the National Parks, game and forest reserves.

**Please help us save
MALAWI'S ELEPHANTS
SPONSOR A SCOUT
EXTEND OUR ELECTRIC FENCE
DONATE WHAT YOU CAN:**

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Our main goal is:

To protect the reserves flora and fauna, and to restore its ecological balance in co-operation with the communities around Thuma F.R. and Dedza-Salima F.R. and enforce the Forestry Act of Malawi.

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