



Venetia Limpopo Wild Dog Project:

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During August we experienced the loss of our Alpha male Able, who had been on the reserve since April 2009. This loss once again highlights the high vulnerability of a small pack, as the loss of an alpha animal can cause major upheavals and possibly even the disintegration of a pack. In Venetia, the current small size of the pack is an additional constraint.

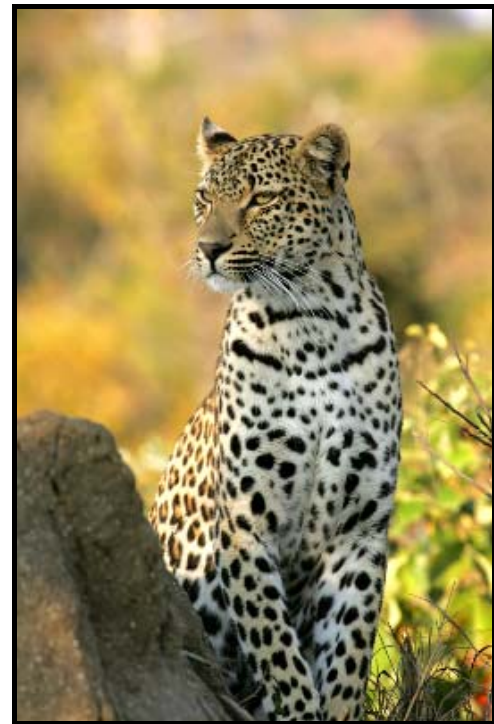


Able disappeared on the 22nd August 2009. This date seems to be unlucky for the Venetia wild dogs, in the last three years, three alpha males have died on the 22nd August, and in exactly the same place – Ringo's cave on Drumsheugh. The area is a rocky ridge line that flanks a valley where the Kolope river snakes its way toward the Limpopo. For scientists interested in spatial and temporal phenomenon this introduces an interesting twist to one's studies, and it is real cause for wonder.

The cause of all deaths was violent, but in no cases were we 100 % certain of culprits, since we have had to rely upon circumstantial evidence. Ringo was killed nearby, and dragged up the rocky escarpment by a brown hyena, but his collar still 'bleeps' away irretrievable from a hidden crevice. Budzatje, went missing here a year ago, along with five of his offspring, presumably killed by lions, that were in the valley below at the time.

This year, we last saw Able and the group heading north-west from Death Valley drift and he was not seen during the following day's tracking session. Only three of the dogs were located but Able and Stellar, the alpha pair, were absent. The search for Able showed a signal from his collar in the direction of Ringo's cave. For the next two days his signal was monitored and Stellar searched for, but to no avail. After two days, a mortality signal started 'bleeping' which has a more rapid distinctive sound. The signal was followed and led researchers to the cave entrance where they located Able's body – apparently a site where the Wild Dog pack had considered denning in the past. The area was immediately searched for evidence, checking for spoor, signs of a struggle, and hair that might be in the vicinity.

We conducted a post-mortem autopsy to try to identify the predator that killed him. All carnivores have prominent canines in each jaw quadrant and when puncturing a victim with their teeth will leave distinct wounds. The inter-canine distances of the puncture wounds were measured and compared to those of predators that are known to occur in the area. When including spoor present near the site, and the nature of bite marks, it was suspected that a female leopard probably killed him. Normally leopards submit to Wild Dogs when they encounter them and a solitary leopard is no match for a group of Wild Dogs. Even large male leopards will simply leap up into a tree when confronted by a pack of Wild Dogs. In the case of Able's death, we can only speculate as to what happened.



We concluded that Able and Stellar were investigating den sites to rear their young when they cornered a leopard. The leopard was probably only defending itself, though leopards are not averse to feeding on the flesh of other carnivores, and do hunt them from time to time.

However, while Able was killed, he was not consumed, and it is plausible that the other wild dogs appeared on the scene and managed to chase the leopard off. So despite the sadness with the loss of our pack's male, we nevertheless learn more about the dynamics of predator interactions. In this event we have demonstrated the risks that wild dogs face when utilising hilly landscapes, which is what they are predisposed to do when pack size shrinks.

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