



Venetia Limpopo Wild Dog Project:

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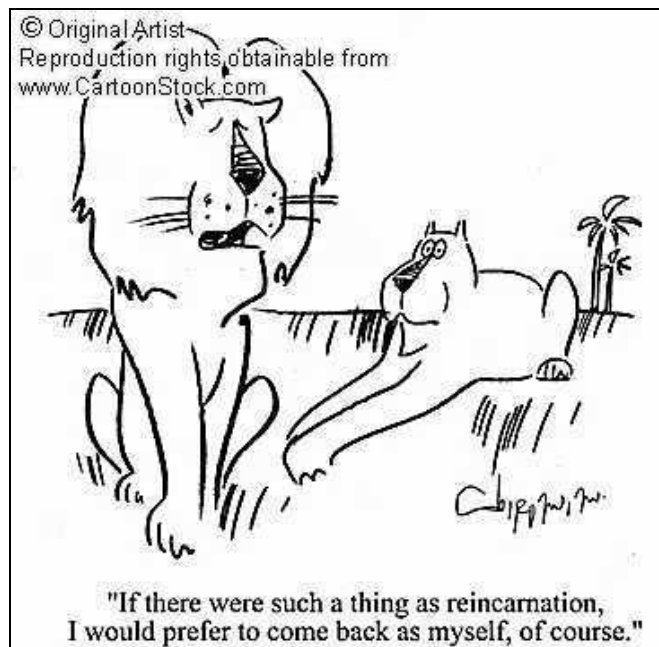
The Venetia Wild Dog Pack have hit a bit of a low recently, but is this any wonder after the strain they have endured these last few months.

The pack still remains at four dogs: – Stellar, at five years old and the alpha female, arrived from Madikwe in February 2007, and was immediately bonded with Fender. Fender, a four year female, arrived earlier in November 2006 from Pilanesberg. Many of you will remember the intense bonding work then conducted in the bomas at Venetia between the new females and the existing Venetia males, where a new pack was eventually formed and released in May 2007.

Stellar's first litter with the then alpha male, Budzatjie (Buzz), produced a litter of four pups. Rory was the only surviving pup, with the other three being killed by lion. In 2008, Stellar had a second litter, but sadly lost not only all 7 of the litter but also Buzz the alpha male. Now down to just three dogs, and no alpha male, 2 male dogs were introduced from the Shambala Reserve in the Waterberg in April 2009. A new alpha male emerged and had a litter with Stellar in August 2009. We have no idea how many pups there were as on the night Stellar gave birth, all of the pups disappeared and Able (the newly emerged alpha male) was killed by leopard.

All of these predators live in competition with each other, and will fight for food sources. In contrast, I want to highlight the sheer adversity of this fragile little pack – all four dogs (apart from mother and son, Stellar and Rory) are unrelated, and yet they hunt together, rest together and support one another – a unique trait to wild dog packs. This is the true nature of the wild dog and shows their forte when the odds are stacked against them.

Wild dog are also incredibly adaptable to obstacles; whilst many species are restricted by the use of fences, wild dog have learnt to use them as a hunting tool, and chase and corner their prey into a fence. Furthermore, in times of stress, they use the terrain available – the Venetia pack has exhibited unusual movement behaviour that has now become the norm for them under stress. They (to coin a new phrase) 'koppie jump'. This means that they travel from high point to high point, avoiding altercations with other carnivores at lower levels whilst enabling good visibility of not only other dangers but also prey – I would like to claim that wild dogs are one of the more intelligent of all the carnivores and when it comes to IQ, they are streets ahead of the cats. A rather non-scientific statement, but something I believe. What other species, when the chips are down, sticks together and fights back, adapting to the difficulties imposed around them. So, whilst I may have painted a bleak picture of our little pack at Venetia, I also want to point out what amazing staying power they have. The Venetia Wild Dog Pack have shown that despite a tough few months, they continue to hunt and strive using instinctive strategies of survival. Prey numbers have increased on Venetia and the lion population and previous threat, is significantly smaller than it was, so I am optimistic that the Venetia Pack will grow to what it once was.



Why am I painting such a bleak picture – well the story is two-fold. I want to highlight the fragile plight of wild dogs and how the newly bonded pack of 2007, with new pups can stand at 10 dogs, and then two years later, have been reduced down to only four. For once humans are not to be fully blamed for this loss, but instead the natural enemies of the wild dog, namely the leopard, lion and spotted hyena.



As always the Venetia Wild Dog Pack continue to excite and keep our attention – there is never a dull moment, and as a hardened researcher, it is often hard to remain emotionally detached – these large, charismatic and incredibly adaptable carnivores maintain the element of surprise, and that is why the Venetia Pack warrant such attention.

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