

Leader of the **PACK**

Having found fame in the *Dynasties* TV series, the painted wolves of Zimbabwe's



Mana Pools are still fighting for survival. But, with a little help, they might be winning

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P

oet called out softly as she trotted past us, her gentle *hoo-hooing* noise meaning “Where are you?” in the language of the painted wolves. Her huge saucer-shaped ears, long skinny legs and mottled coat gave her a quirky beauty as she stood deadly still and listened for her sisters’ replies. The only response was silence.

Before she had become separated, we had been watching the siblings Poet, Tray and Lylie stalking impala near a waterhole in Zimbabwe’s Mana Pools National Park. One by one, each kept interrupting their mission to suddenly squat down and urinate.

“This is really exciting,” photographer and guide Nicholas ‘Nick’ Dyer whispered next to me. “They’re marking their territory to attract males, advertising themselves. It’s like going on Tinder and hoping someone will swipe right.”

An expert on painted wolves, Nick was guiding my partner Will and I through the park on a specialist safari focusing on these predators – and his excitement was tangible. Mana Pools is unusual among African national parks because it offers freedom in the bush: visitors can drive, walk, canoe and even camp without a guide. But being able to find the painted wolves on foot, without being confined to a vehicle or roads, is what makes this experience so special, particularly for keen photographers.

The animals’ intermittent urination signified that the three girls had left their trusted pack of 14 wolves after the death of their alpha-female mum and were now branching out to form a pack of their own, a process called dispersal. When they eventually hook up with some males, one of these girls could become the new alpha female – the head of the pack and the only one who’ll have pups. But she’ll have a tough act to follow.

Their mother was the formidable Blacktip, one of the stars of the BBC’s *Dynasties* series, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, which aired late last year. The documentary told the stories of three alpha females – the charismatic Tait and her daughters Blacktip and Tammy – ►

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Call of the wild
(left) An impala skitters across the plain, bouncing and jumping over seemingly imaginary obstacles; (right) Lylie stands over Poet – just two of the three sisters that we followed across the park. Both are descendants of Blacktip, who featured in the BBC’s *Dynasties* documentary



◀ against a backdrop of territorial squabbles and the struggle for survival. Tait had been pushed off her patch by Blacktip and had moved to the Pridelands area, notorious for its lions. She was never seen again. I was eager to see what was left of the painted wolves' dynasty up close.

Lone wolf

Blacktip herself had disappeared back in December, and is now presumed dead. Yet I was hooked

watching her daughters hunting their prey, crouching low as they moved in for the kill, their coats uniquely patterned in a palette of brown, beige, gold, black and white. Suddenly an impala snorted – its alarm call – the sound reverberating across the plain. The herd scattered, with Poet in hot pursuit. Tray and Lylie sauntered away, leaving their sister alone and vulnerable.

Even in that first glimpse, there was something about Poet,

something intangible, that had captivated me. Perhaps it was her spirit of independence, her quiet confidence or her dark, dappled beauty. To my relief, she'd returned to the waterhole just as dusk was falling.

Her sisters soon called out in reply, running through the albid woodland that pans out from the mighty Zambezi River and gives Mana its distinctive character. Within seconds the three wolves were frolicking in the dust, licking,





kissing, pawing and rolling around together with infectious joy, and greeting each other like long-lost cherished friends.

Family matters

A century ago, around 500,000 painted wolves (aka African wild dogs or painted dogs) roamed across Africa. Today, just 6,500 survive, fewer even than lions or rhino.

“In Mana, they’re lucky: they’re living as they should, unaffected by

mankind. There aren’t snares, they don’t get persecuted or run over, they don’t get rabies from domestic dogs. But they’re still killed by lions and hyena,” Nick told me as we drove to our camp, Nyamatusi.

It opened in April this year and is one of four properties in Mana Pools owned by local operator African Bush Camps, a company renowned for its work with communities and conservation. We eventually arrived at the camp,

set back from the Zambezi River in the Nyamatusi Wilderness Area, whereupon Love, our guide, insisted on driving us to our room. Although easily within walking distance, some grumpy lions were loitering nearby and, with darkness drawing in, he didn’t want to take chances.

Our home for the next three nights was one of six tented rooms spread out among the mahogany trees and albidias. It was both huge and solar-powered, with everything ►



Park life

(clockwise from bottom left) The pack leap on their prey; Nyamatusi Camp; a juvenile African fish eagle in full flight; armed guide Love leads Sue Watt and Nick Dyer on foot through Mana Pools; the park’s waterbucks are easily recognisable by the elliptical target-like rings on their rumps





Paws for thought

(clockwise from top left)

Blondie the lion takes it easy in the shade; walking Mana Pools means you get some close encounters, as Nick found; the painted wolf pups are adorable but face a tough fight for survival; the plush wood-and-thatch lounge area of Nyamatusi Camp overlooks the floodplain



◀ from air-con and a minibar, to a plunge pool out on the deck. Later that night, I heard the same grumpy lions through the canvas, roaring and enjoying their midnight feasts.

It's a far cry from our guide Nick's usual accommodation. He left his life as a successful City trader to travel across Africa, falling in love with Mana and its wolves en route. His home here is a dome tent in the bush, as he aims to raise awareness of the plight of the painted wolves.

Following their 60 minutes of fame in *Dynasties*, momentum is growing around the need to protect these predators. Nick has spent months at a time photographing and walking with them over the past five years, documenting it all in his new book (see right). The profits from its sale go to the Painted Wolf Foundation, which he co-founded last year in an effort to raise funds and support for organisations working on their conservation in the field.

"I want people to love the wolves, just as they love the lions, rhino and elephants," he explained over a G&T

'Waterbucks and kudu with sweeping curly horns stared as we passed by, while impala flew across the track in front of us'

under a starlit sky on Nyamatusi's terrace. "If we don't protect them now, they'll be gone forever."

Sister act

There's more to Mana than its painted wolves, though. Boswell and Fred Astaire, a pair of bull elephants who have mastered the art of standing on their hind legs to reach for pods high up in the ubiquitous albida trees, have starring roles here, too. Boswell eluded us but Fred was quick to show off his talent, leaning back and raising one leg upright to tear off a branch full of food. Herds of cow elephants had several babies in tow, some so tiny that they fitted comfortably under their mum's tummies as they suckled, trying to control their wayward trunks.

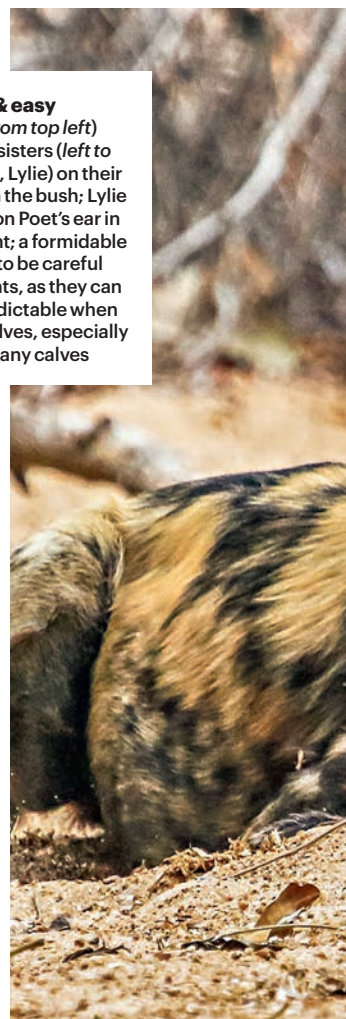
Waterbucks and kudu with sweeping curly horns stared as we passed by; elegant elands the size of horses usually fled, while the impala seemed to jump high over nothing or fly across the track in front of us. But the antelopes were having a much tougher time.

The rains, which usually fall between December and April, had failed. What should have been lush green landscapes were bare and barren by June. Most animals would struggle over the dry season; the exception were predators like Scarface and Blondie, two lions we came across lying in the shade waiting for easy pickings. And if the lions and hyena were getting stronger, that could prove a problem for the painted wolves. ►



A wild dog's life
(top) The proceeds from Nick's new book, *Painted Wolves: A Wild Dog's Life*, go to the Painted Wolf Foundation, which Nick co-founded last year with conservationist Diane Skinner and Peter Blinston, his co-author and director of the NGO Painted Dog Conservation; (below) Nick's slightly gruesome photo of pups at play was highly commended in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2018 competition





Three & easy
(clockwise from top left)
Following the sisters (left to right: Tray, Poet, Lylie) on their journey through the bush; Lylie rests her head on Poet's ear in a tender moment; a formidable kudu; it pays to be careful around elephants, as they can be quite unpredictable when near painted wolves, especially if they have any calves

◀ It didn't take long to find the sisters the following morning. Returning from their early-morning hunt, they were walking obligingly close to the road near the parched Chisasiko Pool, one of the four pools that give the park its name (*mana* means 'four' in Shona). The soft morning light turned the dust to gold, creating long skinny shadows as we followed them in the company of Nick and Love, our armed guide.

"We don't want to stress them. We don't know what trauma they've had since they lost their alpha female. I always try to think how they'd be feeling," Nick whispered.

Then Poet stopped. I recognised her instantly thanks to a large white patch on her left flank. Lylie was lighter than the others with flashes of gold, while Tray was easily identified by her satellite collar. Nick has known them since they were pups. "Poet and Tray were born in 2016. Lylie's a year younger," he confirmed.

'Poet raised her head and looked at me. Her spirit and charisma; her boldness and beauty shone'

Tray and Lylie cuddled together and Poet lay apart, watching over them. Kneeling under a tree about 20 metres away, Will and Nick found the best positions for shooting photos. Meanwhile, I watched Poet through my binoculars, mesmerised by her brilliant white teeth and chocolate-coloured eyes, as well as the strange notches on her Mickey Mouse-like ears and the breakfast bloodstains around her mouth. I was smitten.

Trunk in charge

Some impala had sauntered onto the scene. They hadn't seen the predators but they'd seen us. One barked to warn the others, a single,

strangely ugly snort. The impala watched us, the wolves watched the impala, we watched the wolves: everything stood still. Then Nick broke the spell. Calmly, he whispered: "There's an elephant coming our way. We need to go."

We moved quietly downwind of the elephant. Within minutes he was standing under our tree, and then he noticed the wolves. Suddenly he ran at them in a mock charge, trumpeting furiously, ears flapping, head shaking, kicking up the dust and sending them scurrying away.

"Elephants can be very unpredictable when wolves are around. For some reason they don't





We walked through woodlands of cathedral mopane and baobabs, and through dense 'jesse', a thick bush where branches flick in your face and you can't see elephants lurking. But the baked earth finally revealed wolf tracks, heading towards the dry Mbera II riverbed.

Then we saw the sisters walking along the sand river, their white tails flicking away the flies. We moved closer, eventually crawling along the sand and lying on our tummies behind a fallen log with our Three Degrees just ten metres away. Poet was on her own again, Tray and Lylie curled up together. Tray's collar was covered in fresh red blood.

Poet raised her head and, for a moment, looked directly at me. Her spirit and charisma; her boldness and beauty shone through.

"She's on an incredible journey," Nick said, as if reading what was going through my mind. "Her future's uncertain, but she's strong."

Then Lylie went back onto the bush Tinder, weeing around to leave her scent and narrowly missing Poet. As if to say sorry, she nuzzled her older sister and they started to play, a bundle of fur and fun rolling around together in the sand.

While we watched them for the last time, I pondered their future, hoping that their constant advertising for males would eventually pay off and that they'd form a strong pack with a new generation of pups. And perhaps Poet would continue the dynasty as their alpha female, as formidable and successful as Blacktip, her now famous late mum. ►



like them," Nick said as we left, wondering where our sisters would go next. We decided to call them the Three Degrees: the song 'When Will I See You Again?' seemed appropriate.

Establishing a dynasty

Painted wolves are notoriously elusive and have a vast home range, so seeing them isn't always easy. The best time for sightings is after they've denned, when the pups come out and the pack stays close to home, usually between August and early November.

Even if you don't spot one, you'll still learn a lot about them. Thomas Mutonhori, a ranger and researcher for the Zimbabwean NGO Painted Dog Conservation, joined us for dinner at Nyamatusi, giving guests a fascinating insight into his work.

Mana is currently home to seven packs, some of which are collared for closer research purposes. Thomas had named our three sisters as pups – Poet apparently has a P-shaped marking on

her back, Tray has a pattern like a tray and Lylie was named after a friend. The remnant of Blacktip's pack were still together, with most of last year's pups surviving. But, following her death, Mana's painted wolf population is in flux. New packs might wander outside the safety of the park, so Thomas is researching the tolerance of nearby communities. However, lions and hyena are still the biggest threat that they face.

Driving into camp that evening, Thomas had seen our Three Degrees heading in Nyamatusi's direction – but those grumpy lions were still around, too. I spent a nervous night wondering if something terrible might have happened to them.

On our last morning, Nick had a hunch our wolves might be further east in the Nyamatusi area, where their aunt Tammy had denned two years ago. They were moving on quickly, however, so the chances of seeing them would be slim.

Footnotes

Zimbabwe

THE TRIP

The author travelled with **African Bush Camps** (africanbushcamps.com, 0800 041 8187), which offers a fully inclusive tailor-made trip to Mana Pools, including three nights at Kanga Camp and three nights at Nyamatusi. The trip costs US\$9,860 (£7,878) per person, depending on season and the number of guests, excluding international flights but including return flights from Harare to Mana Pools. This also includes Nick Dyer as a private guide with a private vehicle. The author also flew to Harare via Nairobi with **Kenya Airways** (kenya-airways.com); return flights cost from around £690.

Vital Statistics

Capital: Harare

Population: 17.3 million

Languages: Zimbabwe has 16 official languages; Shona, Ndebele and English are the main ones.

Time: GMT+2

International dialling code: +263

Visas: Required by UK nationals. Single-entry tourist visas cost US\$55 (£44) and can be bought when entering Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwe Embassy in London no longer issues visas (zimlondon.gov.zw).

Money: The Zimbabwean economy is in a state of flux with rising inflation. After ten years of using the US dollar (US\$), the government declared in June that the Zimbabwe dollar (ZWD) would now be the only legal

currency, though details were still being finalised at the time of going to press. Currently, credit cards can be used and Zimbabwe dollars can be obtained at banks and bureaux-de-change. US dollars can still be used for visa fees and for tips.

When to go

November to May: This is the rainy season. Roads become impassable and most camps in Mana are closed from at least December to March.

May to October: After the rains, Mana becomes lush and animals are more difficult to spot. From July to October, they'll be closer to the river and waterholes. This is the best time to see painted wolves, as they hang around the dens while the pups find their feet.

Health & safety

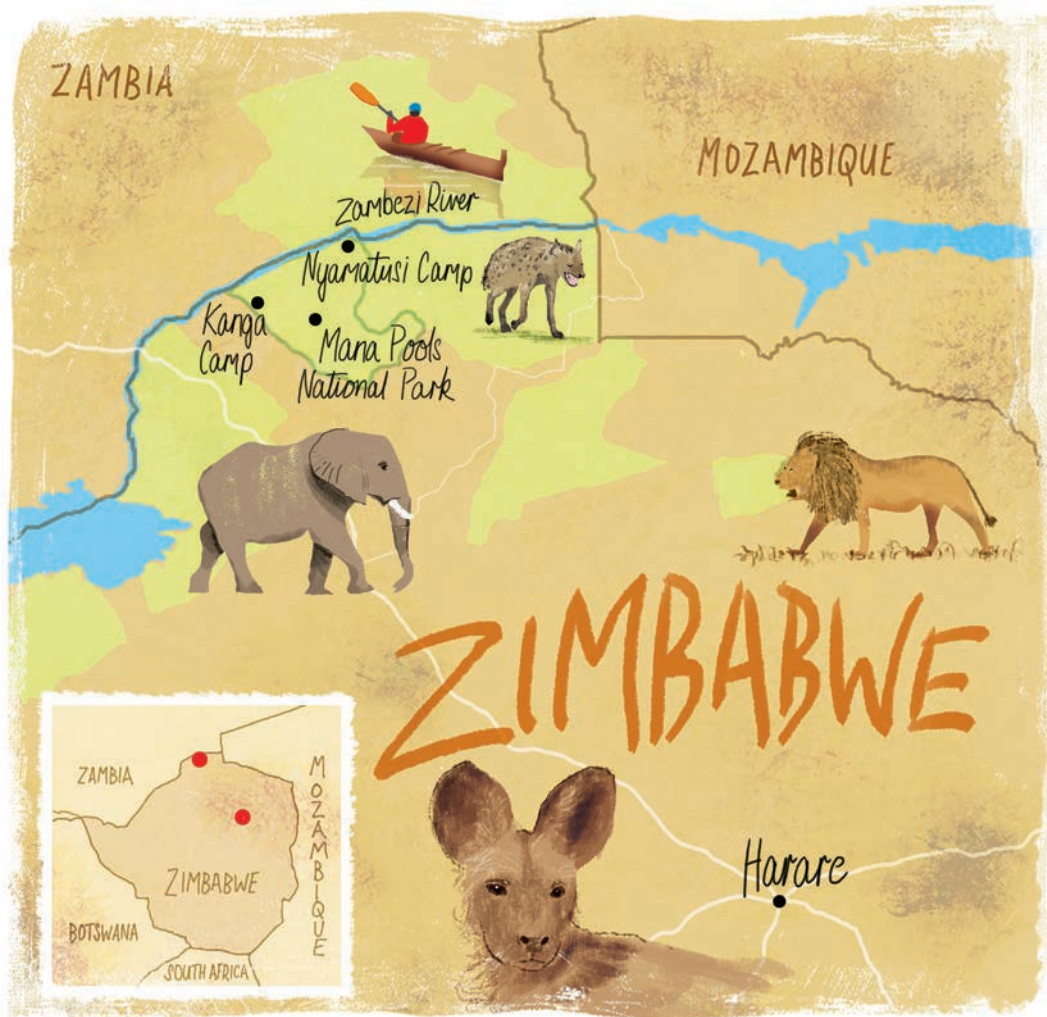
Despite the economic and political woes of Zimbabwe, it is still safe. Don't drive at night, as street lights

are rare out of town, while power shortages mean traffic lights often don't work. See FCO site (gov.uk) for the latest travel information.

Recommended immunisations include hepatitis A, tetanus and typhoid. Yellow fever vaccination certificates are required if arriving from a yellow fever zone. Malaria is present across the Zambezi Valley; consult your doctor for prophylaxes.

Getting there & around

Kenya Airways (kenya-airways.com), **South Africa Airways** (flysaa.com) and **Ethiopian Airlines** (ethiopianairlines.com) all fly from London Heathrow to Harare via Nairobi, Johannesburg and Addis Ababa respectively; flight times from around 15.5 hours. Bush flights from Harare to Mana Pools NP are arranged through **Safari Logistics** (<https://safari-logistics.com>), a partner of **African Bush Camps**, and take around one hour. ►



5 tips for photographing painted wolves

1 Early birds

Painted wolves follow a daily pattern of hunting at first light and at dusk. If your guide knows where the packs are, be sure to get up early – before dawn – to see them all returning from the hunt; their greeting ceremonies are a joy to watch and make for some beautiful images in the morning light.

2 Know your settings

Make sure you're familiar with your camera settings before you go out on safari; you don't want to miss a fabulous shot of painted wolves playing

together while you're twiddling your dials. Autofocus can be tricky if the wolves are in wooded areas, so practice with manual focus. If you're not keen on messing with a camera, leave it on sports mode to capture quick-moving action.

3 Get the gear

You won't be right up there with the wolves – there'll always be a respectful distance between you, so a good zoom lens (up to 400mm) and maybe a converter will help you to get those intimate shots. If you don't want to splash out on

expensive kit, consider hiring instead from a company like lensesforhire.co.uk, but give yourself plenty of time to get to grips with it before you go away.

4 Let's get physical

It's best to be in a low position for photographing painted wolves, either kneeling or lying on the ground. Be prepared to get up quickly but calmly in the event of elephants or predators arriving on the scene. While painted wolves pose no threat to humans, not all

predators are so gracious, so stay calm, listen to your guide and *never* run – there are very few animals that you can outrun in the bush.

5 Take a break

Painted wolves are rare, and to see them is a true privilege. Packs can have 20 or more wolves, which you may never get in a single frame. So have a break away from the lens now and then to really appreciate the full picture. You might get the perfect shot, but you could also be missing out on so much more.

◀ By car, the journey takes four hours to the gate and two more to Nyamatusi Wilderness Area. Public transport to Mana Pools NP is very limited and not the safest. **Nyati Travel** (nyati-travel.com) offers vehicle transfers throughout Zimbabwe.

Accommodation

Amanzi Lodge (amanzi.co.zw) is one of the best places to stay in Harare. This boutique lodge has 16 luxury rooms all themed on different African countries with a pool, gym and a great restaurant. B&B doubles from US\$250 (£200) per night.

Also in Harare, **Highlands House** (highlandshouse.co.zw) has 14 luxury rooms, all stylishly and individually designed, with a swimming pool in relaxing gardens. If dining in the restaurant, pre-order your meal before 5pm. B&B doubles from US\$207 (£165) per night.

Food & drink

In Mana Pools NP, meals and most drinks are included and are of a high standard. Try local staple **sadza**, a heavy ground maize usually served with relishes/meat. Whitebait-like **kapenta** fish from Lake Kariba are popular and avocados are delicious when in season. Also try **Painted Wolf wines** (paintedwolfwines.com), which raises money to support the Painted Wolf Foundation.

TOP TIP
Travel here with an open mind: Zimbabwe is a beautiful country with warm, welcoming people and it needs tourism more than ever. Take the time to explore more of the country – Hwange National Park for its huge elephant population, Lake Kariba for spectacular sunrises, Victoria Falls for adventure and a drenching in the spray.



Behind the lens
Nick Dyer spent five years following painted wolves for his new book

Further reading & information

Painted Wolves: A Wild Dog's Life

(paintedwolf.org/the-book, 2018)

by Nick Dyer and Peter Bilston

– a beautiful coffee-table book.

Zimbabwe (Bradt Guides, 2016).

Dynasties (BBC, 2018) – painted wolf

episode available on BBC iPlayer

www.painteddog.org – Painted

Dog Conservation is the leading

NGO in its field in Zimbabwe. 🐾

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/199

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● 'Kayaking the Zambezi' – issue 144