

# notes from the field

SPRING 2017

Elephants  
Crossing

Every Grevy's  
Zebra Counts

Wildfires  
Threaten Bears



**WCN**

Wildlife Conservation Network

# Elephants Crossing

Infrastructure developments can bisect territory and restrict wildlife mobility.

It began with a prayer; a collective plea for safety and good luck. A group of conservationists from Save the Elephants (STE) readied themselves to tranquilize a 12,000-lb. elephant from a helicopter. It's a tense experience requiring focus, teamwork, and cool heads. Once the elephant was darted and unconscious, the team—highly experienced, but still full of adrenaline—raced to the sleeping giant, slipped a large monitoring collar around her neck, then slowly revived her (while quickly getting out of her way). Collaring wildlife is common in conservation, usually it's done to help scientists learn more about an animal's behavior and movements. This particular elephant was one of ten collared for a study highlighting elephant movements around highways and railways, a growing conservation challenge as populations boom across Africa. Information gathered from these ten individuals will benefit 13,000 other elephants in this part of Kenya.

While highways and railways help people get to and from their destinations more efficiently and quickly, they do the opposite for elephants. Infrastructure developments can bisect territory and restrict wildlife mobility. It is

imperative that wildlife crossing structures, effective fences, and underpasses are adequate for allowing easy movement for elephants. If construction goes up too fast without these elements, elephants can get disoriented and lost, often ending up in densely populated areas, making human-elephant conflict more likely to occur.

Save the Elephants, working with the Kenya Wildlife Service, is monitoring elephant movements to understand and mitigate the effects of Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, the Mombasa-Nairobi highway, and other infrastructural developments. Data they collect shows where elephants are impeded by roads or rails, indicating to STE where to strategically place underpasses, leave culverts open, and establish elephant corridors. There are still challenges to overcome—areas where elephants have no choice but to cross busy roads and risk being hit by cars—but data gathered from this project will help reduce these risks and can be used to inform future projects. With STE's recommendations wildlife mobility can be considered before infrastructure goes up, so elephants can get to their destinations as easily and safely as people do. ■

# Every Grevy's Zebra Counts



What happened to these Grevy's is a symptom of Kenya's ongoing drought.



It was 2:00 a.m., Lekureya was returning home when he came upon two terrified Grevy's zebras, a mother and her foal, encircled by hungry hyenas. Under normal circumstances, Lekureya—a Grevy's Zebra Warrior—would have let nature take its course (after all, hyenas have to eat too). But as a Warrior, he also knew that Grevy's zebra populations were so low that each individual animal was precious. He had to at least try to save them. So Lekureya shouted... so loudly that he not only scared the hyenas away, he also woke his fellow Warriors at the Grevy's Zebra Trust (GZT) patrol base camp, who rushed over to help.

In all the commotion, the mother ran off. Since leaving the defenseless foal by herself at night wasn't safe, the Warriors took her back to camp where she would be protected. Early the next morning, they set off to find the mother. Tracking her footprints from the scene of the foiled attack all the way back to her herd, the Warriors successfully reunited mother and daughter.

Though it has a happy ending, there is a deeper issue at the root of this misadventure; what happened to these Grevy's is a symptom of Kenya's ongoing drought. The drought had dried out the water holes and grasslands frequented by Grevy's zebras. Continuous overgrazing by livestock had degraded whatever grasslands remained, increasing the distance Grevy's now had to travel between procuring food and finding water. For young foals, these longer distances were grueling and they often lagged behind, becoming vulnerable to predator attacks. This is probably what happened to the pair of Grevy's that Lekureya discovered, and how the hyenas found them so late at night.

Grevy's Zebra Trust (GZT) can't end the drought, but it can mitigate the effects. As a short-term solution, GZT is leaving hay along zebra corridors as a supplementary food source for Grevy's. They are also working with communities to instill better livestock grazing practices, as a long-term solution. These efforts will help maintain the integrity of the grasslands and secure the future of Grevy's zebras ■

# Wildfires

## Threaten Bears

The air was thick with smoke as the fire quickly closed in, before long Jose Vallejos would be trapped. Wildfires aren't common in Peru, so he was surprised by how easily the wind carried the flames and how intensely they devoured the forest. Jose spotted a tree outside the fire-line, seizing the opportunity he climbed up and over it, escaping to a safe patch of land. Normally Jose spends his days as a spectacled bear conservationist with Robyn Appleton and Spectacled Bear Conservation (SBC), but for six weeks last winter, he was a firefighter.

While we celebrated the holidays in November and December, wildfires destroyed an area of Peru's cloud forests bigger than Washington DC and San Francisco combined. These forests contained villages—homes, farms, and livestock—as well as critical bear habitat. The fires tore through Laquipampa National Park, claiming the lives of three of the 35 bears that SBC regularly monitors there, and burning away their food sources until only 50 percent of the bears' winter habitat was left. These wildfires were a result of a five-year drought that turned Peru's forests into a tinderbox; as people burned brush, commonly done for agriculture, fires got out of control. SBC's team took immediate action, risking their own lives to fight the fires. Jose lead the charge; coordinating villagers, carrying them in by the truckload, and outfitting them with shovels used to smother the flames. Without these efforts, the entire park would have been reduced to ash and the roughly 100 bears in and around it could have been lost.

With the fires now extinguished, SBC is carving a path forward. They have begun reestablishing critical conservation efforts—recouping damaged equipment such as their remote camera traps, recalculating current bear populations, and starting to reforest areas affected by the fires. Perhaps most importantly, they are working within local communities to stop future fires before they start. Through educational outreach and distributing fire kits, SBC is prioritizing fire prevention, ensuring people and bears remain safe in the cloud forest. ■



Wildfires tore through large swaths of Peru's cloud forests, destroying critical bear habitat and burning away their food sources; only 50 percent of the bears' winter habitat remains.

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*Notes from the Field* is a quarterly peek into the world of a few of the 17 partners WCN supports. For the whole story, please visit our website at [wildnet.org](http://wildnet.org)

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