

Notes from the Field

SPRING 2020

**A Second Chance for
Grey Crowned Cranes**

**New Threats to Lions
in Niassa**

**Scouting for
Grevy's Zebras**



© EyeEm/Alamy Stock Photo



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

A Second Chance to be Wild

After carefully lowering them off the truck, Jean Ferus Niyomwungeri and his small team of colleagues carried several wooden crates closer to the lake. The area was secluded, fenced off from the lions, elephants, and other formidable animals moving about Rwanda's Akagera National Park. Ferus removed the door from one of the crates and quickly stepped aside. Two tall, leggy birds, their heads topped with puffs of flaxen feathers, rushed out—a pair of grey crowned cranes were running boldly into their new home. These were two of the 160 captive grey crowned cranes the Rwanda Wildlife Conservation Association (RWCA) has reintroduced into the wild. Once confined to the gardens of high-end hotels and wealthy homes, these 160 birds now represent the last captive grey crowned cranes in Rwanda.

Grey crowned cranes are striking birds, easily recognizable by the golden feathers that seem to erupt from their heads like a starburst. In Rwanda, they have long been a symbol of wealth and longevity, kept as pets by the well-to-do. Sadly, captive cranes are relegated to a life of stress, malnourishment, and premature death. This illegal pet trade is also a major threat to the species' survival.

As RWCA's Community Conservation Manager, Ferus works to ensure none of Rwanda's grey crowned cranes are captive; he helps reintroduce



captive cranes to the wild, monitors them post-release, and works with communities to prevent future poaching of cranes. Ferus is also one of the 2019 WCN Scholarship Program recipients; he is pursuing a Master of Science at the University of Rwanda where he researches the movement of grey crowned cranes within Rwanda and across

its borders. He will use this information to design better conservation strategies to protect these endangered birds.

RWCA has been very successful at rescuing and releasing captive cranes. Part of their success is due to an amnesty campaign they ran with the Rwandan government that promised no legal repercussions against people voluntarily surrendering their captive cranes. After a period of quarantine and medical treatment, RWCA reintroduces these cranes to the wild in one of two ways: healthy birds are released in Akagera National Park, home of Rwanda's largest protected wetland and RWCA's rehabilitation center for grey crowned cranes; disabled birds that are unable to fly and can't survive in the wild are relocated to Umusambi Village. Built on natural marshland on the edge of Kigali, Umusambi Village is a 40-acre wildlife sanctuary. It was designed to offer an enriching, safe habitat for grey crowned cranes while providing educational and recreational opportunities to visitors. Ferus has played a key role in developing Umusambi Village, helping RWCA move 51 disabled cranes there just a few months ago.



Ferus and the grey crowned cranes he protects are embarking on a new, bright future together. Aided by his WCN scholarship, Ferus is getting a chance to advance his career as a leading conservationist; in turn, he is helping to give Rwanda's grey crowned cranes a second chance to be wild. ■

Above left: Dr. Olivier Nsengimana, founder and executive director of RWCA, examines rescued cranes to make sure they are healthy enough to release. Above: RWCA releasing several rescued grey crowned cranes.



A New and Dangerous Threat

Lion Poaching in Niassa



WCN's Lion Recovery Fund has supported projects in Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zambia that are aimed at understanding the lion parts trade and increasing law enforcement efforts to seek out wildlife contraband and arrest poachers. The LRF made its largest grant to-date to support a major coordinated regional effort to understand and tackle the trade in lion body parts.

Learn more at lionrecoveryfund.org

Outstretched in the shade of a miombo tree, a large, tawny lion casually napped through the hottest part of the day. Even in this reposed state, he was impressive—a powerhouse of muscles and mane, his pointed teeth flashing with every yawn—and oblivious to Agostinho Jorge and his colleague, Eusebio, observing from a nearby truck. Agostinho, Conservation Manager for Niassa Lion Project (NLP) and Ph.D. candidate, has been monitoring the threats to lions in Mozambique's Niassa National Reserve for the past 10 years. His top focus now is addressing a new and dangerous threat to Niassa's lions, including the one dozing just ahead of him.

In Niassa, and throughout central and southern Africa, the illegal trade in lion body parts is growing like a cancer. The features that catapult lions to the top of the food chain—their teeth, claws, skin, and bones—now make them prey for poachers. Propelling the trade is a demand for lion parts that recently emerged in Asia. Some aspects of what is driving this demand are still poorly understood, but it's clear that the market has taken root and lion poaching is rapidly increasing to supply it. In Niassa, where the trade has led to increased snaring and poisoning of lions, NLP is committed to addressing this threat; they are collaborating with wildlife trafficking experts, as well as the Niassa Reserve Management Authority and the Mozambican government, to better understand how and why lions are being targeted. Additionally, Agostinho is collecting information on the lion trade through his Ph.D. research on bushmeat poaching in Niassa.



Lion skins are becoming more common in illegal wildlife markets due to rampant poaching.

This targeted poaching of lions is relatively recent in Niassa. In the past few years, as elephant poaching reached its peak in the Reserve, lion parts were also found amongst seizures of ivory.



Claws, teeth, and other lion body parts are being bought more frequently in Niassa National Reserve and elsewhere.

Even lions NLP had outfitted with radio tracking collars were being killed for their teeth and claws. To combat this trend and reduce poaching, NLP is working with partners across 4,200 square miles of the Reserve to set up a system (using special software) to obtain real time data from collared lions that can be used to plan more effective antipoaching patrols.

NLP's community programs also play a key role in addressing lion poaching in Niassa. NLP offers opportunities for local people to develop alternative sources of income, such as small livestock farming and honey production, that reduce the need for poaching. Furthermore, NLP's Community Guardian Program, managed in partnership with Niassa Reserve, provides 44 villages across the Reserve with tools to protect themselves and their livestock from lion attacks. In return, these communities report back to NLP on any lion deaths and conflict they observe.

Through collaboration and by gathering insight into how the lion parts trade operates in Niassa, NLP is helping to build a body of knowledge that conservationists throughout the region can use to protect lions. As conservationists better understand this burgeoning trade, they are better equipped to quickly, and permanently, end it. ■

Scouting for Grevy's Zebras

Focusing his binoculars, Julius Lekenit could see the Grevy's zebras in sharp detail, an assembly of dizzying stripes and mohawk-style manes. He counted seven clustered together in the distance, let his binoculars dangle from his neck, and started recording details—size, sex, location, surroundings—onto a special datasheet. This is how Kenya-based Grevy's Zebra Trust's (GZT) Scouts typically collect information about one of Africa's most endangered animals. Julius is the Field Operations Manager for GZT, whose wildlife monitoring Scouts program is renowned for its success. At the behest of the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority, Julius brought GZT's Scout training to the Alledeghi Wildlife Reserve in Ethiopia, the only other country besides Kenya where Grevy's zebra can still be found.

Alledeghi is home to about 150 Grevy's zebras, comprising 75% of Ethiopia's total Grevy's population. Julius and his colleague, GZT's Research Officer, Annsarah Wangui, came there to conduct a three-day workshop, training Scouts to protect this important population of Grevy's zebras and their cousin, the critically endangered African wild



Mia Collins

ass. One group will work outside of the Reserve, near local communities, to monitor the African wild ass. The other group will work inside the Reserve to collect data on Grevy's zebras—their body condition, behaviors, mortalities, and movements. Julius and Annsarah taught these groups how to monitor these two species, how to collect data and record information using their datasheets, and how to use GPS to obtain location

coordinates. GZT uses these same techniques in Kenya where they employ 29 Scouts from different pastoral communities.

Since Scouts are also from the local communities, they play a key role in promoting positive attitudes towards Grevy's zebras within neighboring pastoral villages. In Ethiopia, the Scouts' ability to change negative behaviors is especially important because Grevy's zebras there are still hunted for food and medicine. While hunting Grevy's zebras has drastically reduced in Kenya since the 1970s, it persists in Ethiopia at concerning levels. This is partly due to tension between different communities, which exacerbates the hunting of Grevy's zebras either for food during unstable times, or as collateral damage in the midst of inter-ethnic conflict.

In 2014, GZT addressed similar issues in Kenya by helping to mitigate disagreements between communities in conflict and developing a regional Conservation Council representing elders, warriors, and women from several communities. The Council helps foster peace and address illegal hunting within the communities. Council members share the issues affecting their community, which keeps GZT informed and able

to stop problems, like attempts to hunt Grevy's zebras, before they start. The Ethiopian Wildlife Authority has asked GZT to help them develop similar peace-building efforts in Ethiopia.

This kind of collaboration has huge benefits for conservation; it helps conservationists learn from



GZT

Left: GZT Scouts in Kenya monitor Grevy's zebras using the same techniques that GZT used to train Scouts in Ethiopia. Above: The GZT team training Scouts with the Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Authority in Alledeghi Wildlife Reserve.

each other and it can accelerate and broaden positive impact. GZT has an impressive model for community engagement that will be a big help to Ethiopian wildlife authorities as they work together to save the largest and rarest zebra species in Africa. ■



GZT



RWCA

WCN protects endangered wildlife by supporting conservationists who ensure wildlife and people coexist and thrive.

Invest In Wildlife Conservation

We greatly appreciate your dedication to protecting wildlife. Your kind support is vital to our partners' heroic and enduring work in conservation.

WAYS TO GIVE

- ▶ Donate by mail, phone, fax, or online
- ▶ Become a monthly donor
- ▶ Give a gift on behalf of someone else
- ▶ Include WCN in your estate plans
- ▶ Donate stock or other securities

WCN maintains Charity Navigator's highest possible 4-star rating. Charity Navigator is America's leading independent charity evaluator, and rates over 8,000 charities on their Financial Health and Accountability & Transparency.



EIN # 30-0108469 • CFC # 63038

If you prefer to receive the WCN newsletter in electronic form, please let us know by calling 415-202-6380 or emailing info@wildnet.org.

PLEASE JOIN US AT OUR
FIRST-EVER
**VIRTUAL
SPRING EXPO**

ON APRIL 25TH

VISIT **WILDNET.ORG/EVENTS**
FOR DETAILS

NONPROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
OAKLAND, CA
PERMIT NO. 259

WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network



209 Mississippi Street
San Francisco, CA 94107, USA
Ph. (415) 202-6380

wildnet.org