

Notes from the Field

WINTER 2020

NEW HOPE SPROUTS IN COLOMBIA

PIG BANKS AND POACHERS

A COMMUNITY LIONESS



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

New Hope Sprouts in Colombia

Light pierced through the canopy and shined on the hands of Luis Centena, tending the soil of Proyecto Tití's (PT) sapling nursery. Collecting seeds and propagating saplings are key measures in PT's long-term plan to rebuild the forests for cotton-top tamarins, one of the world's rarest primates. As a Field Assistant, Luis often sees cotton-tops bouncing between treetops, but a new primate has caught his attention in recent months. Luis and PT staff have spotted the critically endangered black-headed spider monkey, a new addition to the cotton-top's forest. The presence of this lanky monkey is a good sign that the forests are healthy enough to support such a rare species. Now, as Luis tends to the new trees in his nursery, he is reminded that he is truly shaping the future of endangered wildlife in northern Colombia's forests.

Luis took a roundabout path to conservation. He spent twenty years as an illegal logger before changing his stripes, yet it was cutting down trees that taught Luis so much about them. In 2019, he joined PT and brought a wealth of knowledge about identifying specific trees and locating their

seeds. Luis now grows precious saplings to make amends for the actions of his youth, taking pride in every new tree he propagates. To date, PT has planted over 100,000 saplings within 494 acres of forest corridors. They have achieved this feat with



the help of 150 local families who own land in the region and have agreed to help restore habitat for cotton-tops, which are found only in Colombia.

The true miracle of forest restoration is that, while done in the name of cotton-tops, other wildlife will also benefit. This year's sightings of the black-headed spider monkey have proven that forest restoration is creating safe habitat for many animals in need of protection. PT staff have also come across Dahl's toad-headed turtles, another critically endangered species long absent from the area until the start of their forest restoration project, and PT has heard rumors that the rare blue-billed curassow has also returned. By protecting the cotton-tops' home, PT is welcoming other threatened wildlife to be their neighbors.

Establishing interconnected forests requires patience. It takes 10 years for forests to recover enough to provide adequate food for cotton-tops, and 20 years for trees to grow tall enough to keep them safe from predators. Unsustainable agriculture, illegal logging, and forest fires can hinder recovery and prolong this process. PT is currently in the second year of their five-year plan to double both the number of trees planted and acres protected by 2023.

Proyecto Tití is pleased with their project's success and confident in its continued potential. Luis

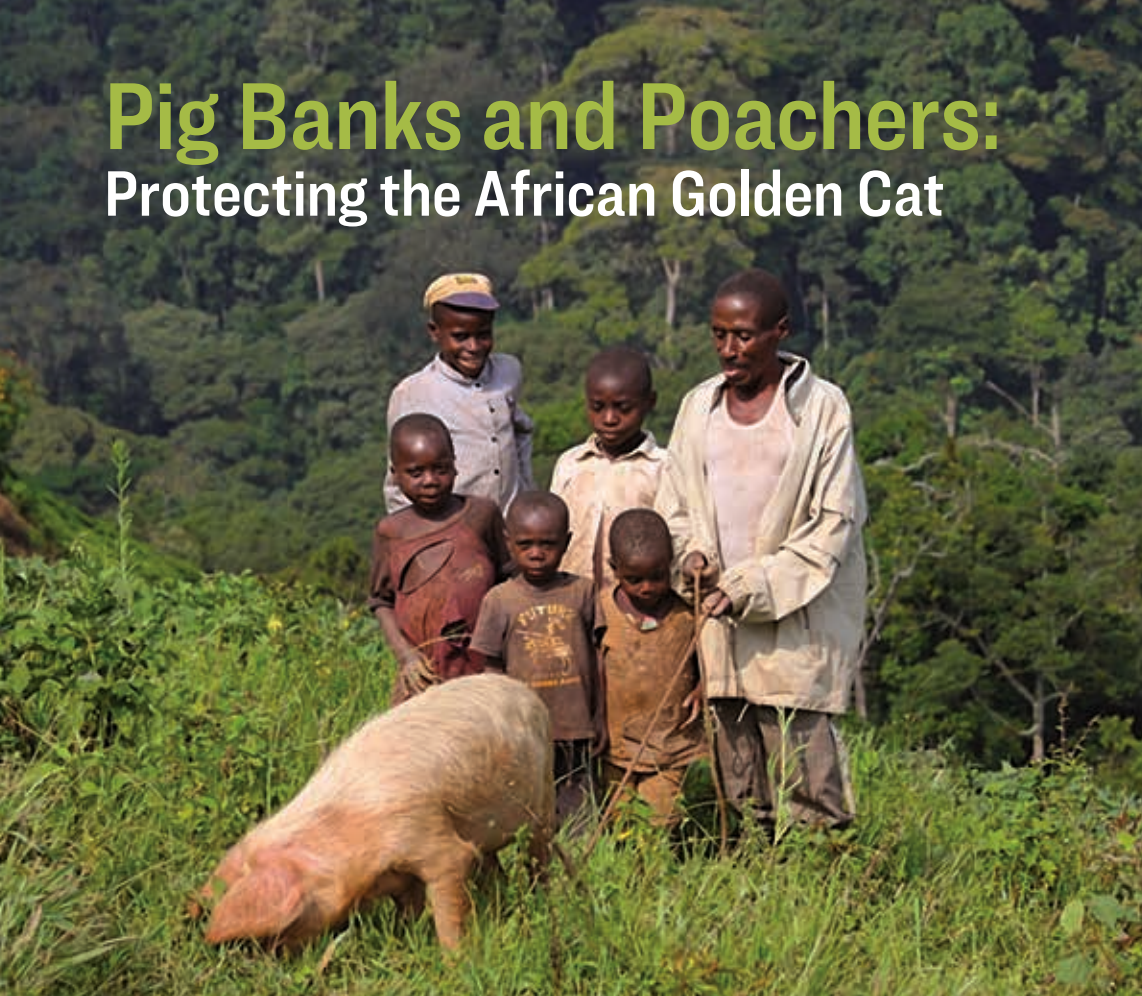
Left: The presence of black-headed spider monkeys is a sign that Proyecto Tití's forest restoration program is working. Below left: Luis Centena propagates new saplings to be planted in forest corridors. Below right: Cotton-top tamarins benefit greatly from the planting of new trees, as do countless other endangered wildlife.



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Centena and his team of 12 are responsible for hundreds of thousands of new trees that will provide food and shelter to cotton-tops, black-headed spider monkeys, and countless other species. Most of all, Luis is proud of the future that he and PT are building, one tree at a time. ■

Pig Banks and Poachers: Protecting the African Golden Cat



Mr. Kakuru's entire family is involved in the pig banking program. This household project shows his children the importance of conservation.

To keep her from wandering into the neighbor's garden, David Kakuru leashed his pig like a family Labrador while she sniffed the ground for herbs. The grass was tall enough to brush the pig's belly as they walked along the hillside surrounded by dense, equatorial forest. Mr. Kakuru's homestead borders Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, where just four years ago, he spent his days clandestinely setting bushmeat snares. No longer a poacher, Mr. Kakuru now helps to stop poaching, and the secret to his conversion is at the end of his leash rooting around for something to eat.

Poaching snares are the leading threat to one of Africa's least known wild cats. Most people are unfamiliar with the African golden cat—it was photographed in the wild for the first time

in 2002—but such obscurity is typical for small cats. Globally, the 33 species of small cats receive little attention compared to their big cousins. To bring attention to these species, Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation supports local conservationists, including Badru Mugerwa, perhaps the world's only expert involved in direct conservation of the African golden cat. Badru founded Embaka, a Ugandan organization using community-based efforts to reduce the need for poaching; while usually intended for other wildlife, poaching snares are unintentionally killing African golden cats. When Badru started identifying the threats to these cats, he found there were 50% fewer African golden cats in the areas where poaching occurred. To protect this cat, Badru needed to confront what was driving the poaching: the need for food and income.

This is what sparked the plan for pig banking. Pigs are both a food source and an income generator. They are worth up to \$25 locally, which is decent money in Uganda, and they're prolific breeders, offering 6-15 piglets in each litter. Embaka's pig bank program provides a poacher with a female pig if he agrees to stop poaching. Once that pig gives birth, the now ex-poacher can keep all the piglets except one, which he must donate to his closest neighbor, who then goes through the same process. This chain continues throughout the entire community. Because everyone is invested in the success of the pig bank, it creates community watchdogs, increasing social pressure not to poach.

Mr. Kakuru was a poacher for 30 years. He understood its negative impact, but needed a livelihood. He was chosen to participate in Embaka's pig bank program, and this summer he became the first in his village to own a pig. Since joining the program, Mr. Kakuru has taken on an ambassador role, helping several

of his neighbors quit poaching and join community anti-poaching watch groups. Embaka has now mobilized 11 of these watch groups, involving 534 reformed poachers around Bwindi.

The African golden cat is so elusive that it's possible very few people participating in the pig bank will ever see one alive in the wild. But their transition from setting snares to raising pigs will help this special, little-known cat to survive while empowering their own communities to thrive. ■



Top: As a steady source of food and income, pig banking offers a good incentive to stop poaching.

Left: African golden cats aren't always golden. Sometimes their coats can be grey or black.

Bottom: Embaka has mobilized 11 community anti-poaching watch groups involving 534 reformed poachers around Bwindi.



Photos in this spread by Badru Mugerwa Embaka except where noted otherwise.

Sebastian Kemmerle/Embera.com

A Community Lioness

Despite being a muscular 300 lbs., Naramat moved as discreetly as a cat burglar. She was precariously close to people, so she kept hidden in daytime, emerging after sundown to hunt warthogs in the dark. Together with her three cubs, she steadily moved north. The foursome had been away from Westgate Conservancy for eight months, and the Ewaso Lions team was anxious about this absence. Naramat is a bold lion with a nomadic spirit and a predilection for living close to people, which could be dangerous if she went after their livestock. At last, on a bright October morning, the Ewaso Lions team sighed with relief as they spotted Naramat nearby, her trio of cubs in tow.

Naramat means “the caring one,” which not only captures the lioness’s qualities, but also that of the conservationists who have monitored her and the communities who have embraced her for 12 years. She is a special lioness because rather than living inside the government designated protected area, Naramat is a “community lioness,” spending most of her time near villages. Her choice to live alongside people is evidence that the Westgate communities are deeply conservation minded; they have truly made the area a place of human-lion coexistence.

A few years ago, it seemed as if Naramat may have lost her taste for being Westgate’s community lion when she left and settled 21 miles south in Il Ngwesi Conservancy. The Ewaso Lions team didn’t know if Il Ngwesi was suitable habitat for lions, but Naramat seemed to sense she would find more water and prey there. After seeing her success in Il Ngwesi, Ewaso Lions followed suit, helping to build tolerance for lions amongst the communities in Naramat’s second home. Naramat has since traveled back and forth between Westgate and Il Ngwesi several times, moving through some dicey territory along the way—unfamiliar areas where people may not want a lion for a neighbor. Each time she makes this pilgrimage, it puts the Ewaso Lions team on edge until they know she is in a safe area.

Recently, Ewaso Lions was reminded that even close to home, addressing conflict between communities and lions requires persistence. Not far from Westgate, in a nearby village, Naramat made a meal out of a herder’s livestock. The community was up in arms. This inspired Ewaso Lions to set up a mobile

After Naramat killed some livestock in a nearby village, Ewaso Lions set up a mobile camp there to stop any additional conflict.

camp close to the conflict hotspot, where they actively monitor the movements of both Naramat and the livestock. This way they can alert herders if a lion is nearby, stopping conflict before it starts.

Naramat has shown Ewaso Lions that real coexistence in community areas is possible. She is famous in Westgate where the local people are equally as invested in her well-being as conservationists. In fact, Ewaso Lions sees no distinction between communities and conservationists when it comes to protecting lions. As Naramat moves between Westgate and Il Ngwesi, she continues to be a symbol of Ewaso Lions’ success in integrating communities and conservation, helping people and lions share the landscape. ■



Naramat is a special lioness that prefers to roam independently from a pride. She and her three cubs have safely returned to Westgate Conservancy together, much to the delight of local communities and Ewaso Lions.



**WE WISH
YOU A
JOYFUL
HOLIDAY
SEASON!**

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