

Notes from the Field

SPRING 2021

**Saiga Herds
Flourishing Again**

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Elephant Recovery**

**Valuing the Lives
of Lions**



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Saiga Herds Begin Flourishing Again

The winds howl in chorus across the arid plains of Central and East Asia, unimpeded by forests or mountains. Ground once peppered with the hoofprints of countless saiga antelope has increasingly grown bare as saiga have inched closer to extinction. Yet, in addition to their tubular noses, saiga are renowned for being survivors, and their latest breeding season brought long absent good fortune to this belabored species. Researchers discovered 530 saiga calves tucked beneath the tall grasses of Kazakhstan's Ustyurt Plateau, a miraculous number of newborns found in just a single aggregation. In neighboring Mongolia, the saiga population also bloomed to over 8,450 individuals, up from 3,800 in 2018. This tremendous growth is a sign that the efforts of the Saiga Conservation Alliance (SCA) and other regional conservationists are working.

IN 2020, SCA'S TYPICAL AERIAL SURVEYS COULDN'T HAPPEN DUE TO THE PANDEMIC. THEY INSTEAD VENTURED INTO THE FIELD TO MEASURE POPULATION GROWTH. SCA PLANS TO CONTINUE AERIAL SURVEYS IN 2021.

SCA posits that even more newborns went undiscovered, theorizing that over 100,000 calves were born in Kazakhstan last year. While these numbers are encouraging, conservationists caution that many of these saiga will not survive to adulthood. In both Kazakhstan and Mongolia,



saiga antelope have been beset by poachers since the 1980s. Male saiga are targeted for their horns, for which there is high demand in traditional Asian medicines, leading to a shortage of breeding pairs. Severe winters, drought, and infectious disease outbreaks have also devastated their numbers, and human infrastructure projects have led to habitat loss and migration disruption.

To address these threats, SCA maintains close ties with a network that gives saiga a fighting chance at survival. One of their main partners, the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan (ACBK), focuses on researching saiga migration and restoring saiga habitat. Since 2011, SCA has participated in initiatives with ACBK and the Kazakh government, leading to designated habitat corridors and protected areas, ranger patrols, and monitoring programs. SCA also provides

Opposite page: Members of ACBK carefully measure newborn saiga calves. Below: The high birth rate of saiga calves is a hopeful sign that recovery is possible. SCA staff take detailed notes about population health when inspecting the calves.

financial support to ACBK for children's activities and annual celebrations, like Saiga Day, that promote saiga conservation and share best practices with programs throughout saiga range countries. These combined efforts are contributing to recovery, with the last five years of surveys noting an increase in all three saiga populations in Kazakhstan.

SCA also extends administrative coordination and community support to WWF-Mongolia, who manage most saiga conservation fieldwork in that country. WWF-Mongolia's rangers conduct anti-poaching patrols twice a month and regularly monitor herds, which is necessary considering Mongolia's saiga have been saved from extinction twice in the last 30 years—once from disease and again from a harsh winter. The climate conditions of recent years have been favorable in Mongolia, allowing conservationists' saiga recovery strategies to bear fruit.

This recent saiga baby boom is a hopeful sign, but to ensure saiga populations continue to grow, sustainable rangeland management and ongoing anti-poaching measures are needed. New saiga herds also need to form in these regions, so that a single natural disaster cannot wipe out an entire population. By expanding protected areas and policies, SCA and its partners will help these survivors continue to thrive, once again decorating Asia's plains with countless hoofprints. ■



Top & left: © Jean-François Lagrot

Giant Steps for Elephant Recovery

David Daballen squinted as he scanned for elephants moving across the landscape hundreds of feet below. The afternoon sun ushered beads of sweat down his face as the aircraft flew low over the plains, the horizon behind the blur of propellers. As the Head of Field Operations for Save the Elephants (STE), David regularly takes to the skies to track roaming wild elephants fitted with GPS collars across Kenya via an app that receives the collar data. As the locator icon appeared on his tablet, David knew he had found Koya's herd.

Along with six of her family members, including calves, Koya recently left Samburu County and traveled nearly 50 miles across an area previously plagued by ivory poachers and tribal conflicts, reaching Marsabit County in the north. Female elephants, especially those with calves, are less likely to travel through high risk areas, making Koya's milestone a significant indicator that Kenya's elephants are returning to behavior not regularly seen since before the ivory crisis began. Because of the ongoing danger, no elephant has been recorded making this trek since 2008, so Koya's tracks are the first seen on this trail in 13 years. This signals to STE that elephants now feel safe enough to venture back into spaces they had once fled.



Koya's pilgrimage indicates the work of STE, the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), and local communities are making these areas of Kenya safe for elephants again. The ivory crisis put elephants under constant threat

from 2009 to 2012. Rampant poaching combined with regional unrest splintered the remaining elephants into fragmented clusters, unable to reconnect due to these danger zones. But STE, NRT, and Kenyan government agencies have spent years protecting elephants from poachers and implementing sustainable area management to improve security for wildlife and local people. Local communities have also partnered with STE and NRT to help reduce the conflicts that made large swaths of Kenya inhospitable to elephants. Over 800 scouts have been deployed across NRT's conservancies for round-the-clock monitoring of elephants.

Years of establishing these protections are now paying off. Elephant poaching incidents have steadily declined and elephants are beginning to reunite, as demonstrated by Koya and her family exploring formerly dangerous areas. This increased range and safety has also led to an elephant baby boom in the region. When elephants are under stress they have trouble breeding. However, last year, STE recorded more than 90 elephant calves born in Samburu National Reserve, the highest birth rate there since 2008. As the elephant population recovers, STE's monitoring will become even more crucial to protecting elephants in real time, better understanding elephant behavior among reacquainted herds, and studying their migration patterns across newly reclaimed territory.

Opposite page: STE uses GPS collars to track the migration of many elephant herds and to quickly locate them in case of emergencies. Above: David Daballen closely monitors elephants in the field. Right: Koya and her herd on the move, as seen from STE's tracking aircraft.



Koya's remarkable journey symbolizes progress for the entire Kenyan elephant population, proving that endangered wildlife can bounce back when threats are removed. And as elephants like Koya continue to tread into new lands, David and STE will be there to track every groundbreaking step. ■

Learning to Value the Lives of Lions



© Jillian Knox

Above: The lions of Niassa Special Reserve. Opposite page: NLP staff install camera traps to track wildlife for performance payments. A night vision camera trap photo of two lions in Ruaha National Park. Niassa's inselbergs tower over the plains that lions call home.

The Miombo woodlands stretch out for miles, intermittently marked by two curving rivers and massive granite inselbergs that loom like sleeping giants. Within this striking landscape, packs of painted dogs chase down impalas, elephants tug leaves off of branches, and lions silently stalk their prey. In both size and attributes, Mozambique's Niassa Special Reserve is one of the greatest wild places in Africa. Inside its borders, 60,000 people live alongside roughly 900 lions, one of the largest lion populations on the continent. Unfortunately, lions can be terrible neighbors—lion attacks are a risk to people protecting their crops from bushpigs at night. Consequently, Niassa Lion Project (NLP) works across 90% of the Reserve's 44 villages to improve human-lion coexistence. NLP also leads the Lion Coalition Project that, in collaboration with the Reserve's management authority, brings together diverse partners to protect the Reserve's lions and their prey.

With a recent grant from the Lion Recovery Fund (LRF), this coalition is employing an innovative conservation approach wherein communities are incentivized to protect wildlife, turning lions from a liability to a financial benefit.

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PERFORMANCE PAYMENT PROJECTS HELP UNLOCK THE VALUE OF LIONS. THE LRF SUPPORTED PROJECT IN RUAHA HAS BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL, SOME OF THE PARTICIPATING VILLAGES EVEN INTRODUCED LOCAL BANS ON LION AND ELEPHANT POACHING IN RECOGNITION OF THE BENEFITS THEY HAVE RECEIVED.

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The LRF has been investing in “performance payment” projects since its early days and is gradually expanding this support. These projects vary slightly but all incentivize local people to reduce human-lion conflict by offering them payments predicated on

a healthy presence of wildlife—frequently determined by the number of animals recorded via camera traps. For example, LRF funding helped the Ruaha Carnivore Project in Tanzania develop a grid of camera traps to measure the abundance of wildlife in the area, which was used as the basis for their performance payments. Payments might also be given based on a community's adherence to guidelines regarding the extent of livestock grazing, agriculture, or human settlement and even reduced if such rules are transgressed.

In Niassa, performance payments are particularly important now as targeted lion poaching has grown to be a pressing threat. Historically, poaching in Niassa has been focused on bushmeat, not specifically lions. But recently, there has been a worrying

increase in demand for lion body parts, which has caused poachers to deliberately put lions in their crosshairs.

NLP has already seen significant reductions in poaching by implementing other performance payment programs in partnership with communities. New funding from the LRF will



Colleen Berg



Ruaha Carnivore Project

help advance these programs and anti-poaching law enforcement with partners across the Reserve. Similar to Ruaha, this project will use camera traps. Each wild animal captured on camera generates a certain number of points, with the more threatened and conflict-causing species worth more. Every three months, those points are tallied and converted into specific goods that are paid out to each of the 10 participating villages, creating a solid link between community benefits and the presence of wildlife.

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WITH A GRANT FROM THE LRF, THE LION COALITION PROJECT WILL BE ABLE TO DEPLOY A PERFORMANCE PAYMENT PROJECT AND ENHANCE THEIR ANTI-POACHING EFFORTS IN KEY AREAS OF THE RESERVE.

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Performance payments are a great investment because they diminish the challenges and costs inherent in living with lions, so that coexistence is worthwhile and the presence of wildlife is valuable. In Niassa, this could be a key part of ensuring that lions continue to safely inhabit one of the greatest and last true wilderness areas on Earth. ■



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