

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— SPRING 2023 —

**USING LIVESTOCK TO RESTORE
KENYA'S RANGELANDS**

**ADVANCING CONSERVATION
WITH A SINGLE PHOTO**

**A DREAM OF TOMORROW'S
LEADERS**



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network



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GREVY'S ZEBRA TRUST

Using Livestock to Restore Kenya's Rangelands

Ngeeti Lempate waved to her son as he led their cattle into the whispering grasses of northern Kenya's Westgate Community Conservancy. She watched them depart, recalling when her community first settled in Westgate long ago and these plains were filled with Grevy's zebras. Over the years, she noticed both the number of zebras and the health of the rangelands decline due to unchecked livestock grazing. To revitalize her home's pastures, Ngeeti has championed the regenerative grazing program pioneered by Grevy's Zebra Trust (GZT) to restore Kenya's rangelands with the very herds that once devoured them.

Pastoralist communities like Ngeeti's were once nomadic, continuously leading livestock from pasture to pasture. Since they never stayed too long in one place, the vegetation consumed by livestock had time to recover once the herd migrated. But this nomadic culture has transitioned into a sedentary one, with many communities settling near social amenities like schools and health centers. This has led to years of

overgrazing by livestock in the same areas, giving grass no time to regrow and reducing land quality for both livestock and wild ungulates, including endangered Grevy's zebras which have lost most of their habitat to overgrazing.

To break this land degradation cycle, GZT helps communities restore habitats through regenerative grazing, where they identify suitable grazing pastures and keep others off limits for vegetation recovery. GZT meets with villagers to evaluate their pastures and create a formal plan for coordinated grazing. Large pastures are sectioned off as grazing reserves, while others remain open for all herds to share. The mass of livestock hooves in the open pastures aids in tilling the hard, compact topsoil, allowing rain and nutrients from livestock dung to absorb into the ground. Meanwhile, grass in the reserves is given time to regrow, and Grevy's zebras can forage in these pastures without competing with livestock. When the open pastures are eventually depleted, the herders then open up the reserve pastures for their livestock, while the depleted pastures are sealed off and given time to

Pastoralist communities and Grevy's zebras both depend on each other to survive in drought-prone Kenya—the zebras feed in pastures restored by regenerative grazing, and communities rely on the zebras to show them where scarce water sources are located.

recover. This process is repeated, with livestock rotating from pasture to pasture.

Regenerative grazing uses livestock as tools for regrowing degraded rangelands, creating productive pastures for livestock and wildlife. Participating communities have rallied behind this effective process to restore pastures so that all life can survive during Kenya's dry season. Ngeeti has taken a prominent role in GZT's land restoration work, leading a large group of women in grass and soil stewardship and demonstrating true community ownership of conservation. And this year, since many children in pastoralist communities participate in herding, GZT is training these children in regenerative grazing. This empowers them to take an active role in the conservation of their land, improve livestock health, and prevent wildlife from vanishing from their home.

Ngeeti has already noticed more Grevy's zebras returning to the area, including pregnant mares, indicating that the land can again support their population growth. Thankful that her son doesn't need to travel far to find high quality pastures, Ngeeti takes pride in the work that she and her community have done to restore Westgate's rangelands. ■



Elizabeth Shrier-Wild Elements Studios

Above: Ngeeti Lempate began as a GZT scout, monitoring Grevy's zebras. Realizing that rangeland restoration would benefit both wildlife and livestock, she transitioned to the regenerative grazing program. Below: Livestock heading to a communal grazing pasture



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Advancing Conservation With a Single Photo



Top: Uspallata's mountain regiment helping install camera traps. Inset: An Andean cat paw print being measured. Right: The camera trap photo that proved Andean cats live in Uspallata.

The wind howled and the sky was awash with orange and violet as Dr. Rocío Palacios, Executive Director of Andean Cat Alliance (AGA), placed the last camera trap in the rocky terrain of Uspallata Defense Nature Reserve. This was the final day that AGA and their project partner, Natura International, could set up camera traps for data collection on this military-owned land. Despite high hopes, Rocío wasn't sure if this particular camera would capture anything useful in such a remote location. Unexpectedly, it would end up being the most important camera of them all, yielding a discovery that could help designate this area as a new national park.

This camera captured an astonishing photo of an Andean cat prowling in the mountains near the town of Uspallata. As some of the rarest, most elusive small wild cats in the world, Andean cats are known as the ghosts of the Andes. This is the first and only evidence of the species living in this unlikely place, where the military regularly holds training and munitions practice. Uspallata is a Natural Reserve of Defense—a protected area designed for both land preservation and military application.

Although established five years ago, the Reserve is only now being converted for conservation purposes thanks to Natura International, who invited AGA to help survey endangered wildlife there. Uspallata is located near the Chilean border at a key point where the cats transition from high mountains to lower elevations. Rocío suspects that this makes Uspallata critical to maintaining connectivity between the Andean cats' northern and southern range.

Turning the Reserve into a national park would improve this Andean cat territory by moving military activity to areas less relevant to wildlife conservation and regulating high tourism near Uspallata. In order to achieve this, AGA must prove that Uspallata is important to Andean cat survival. The photo from AGA's camera trap is the only photographic evidence of the cats in the area, making it crucial to the project. While AGA cannot yet estimate how many Andean cats live in Uspallata, they are collecting fecal samples for genetic analysis to see if the cats here are breeding with neighboring populations. Meanwhile, Natura International drives the social movement supporting the national park plan. This campaign, combined with AGA's data, will hopefully convince politicians and military officials to approve the park's creation.

Although establishing the park means relocating military operations, Rocío was pleasantly surprised that the mountain regiment cooperated with her research, even climbing high cliffs to help her install camera traps. Local residents are also excited about a potential new national park; like the military, they had no idea that Andean

Uspallata Defense Nature Reserve was co-created by Argentina's National Parks Administration and the National Ministry of Defense. Since they do not have scientific backgrounds, they rely on AGA and Natura International to inform their decisions about conservation in this 543,000 acre protected area.

cats shared their land, so AGA is supporting education efforts and developing new conservation programs in the area to reduce threats to Andean cats. Uspallata represents a rare opportunity to transform important Andean cat habitat into a national park and inspire local people and the military to become invested in conservation.

Rocío will continue documenting signs of Andean cat presence in Uspallata, and by gathering this eye-opening data, AGA can help safeguard this unlikely, but important, Andean cat habitat. ■

Natura International, Andean Cat Alliance, Ministerio de Defensa Argentina, Mendoza Gobierno



A Dream of Tomorrow's Leaders

In addition to supporting individual career growth, WCN's Career Program also fosters connections between members of each cohort, helping them learn from each other to broaden their field conservation expertise.



Above: Bridget and the ZCP team collaring a painted dog. Right: Bridget on an aerial carnivore survey.

Holding her camera tightly, Bridget Mayani peered out of the plane's open door toward the ground below. The Luangwa River shimmered in the late morning sun, and along its sandy bank, she spied a pack of painted dogs taking a drink. Luangwa Valley is home to many of these endangered canines, and as a Senior Field Ecologist for the Zambian Carnivore Programme (ZCP), Bridget spends most of her time monitoring predators from trucks or aircraft. This is her dream job, and her participation in WCN's Career Program has given her the resources and support to take her career to new heights for the betterment of Zambia's carnivores.

Growing up, Bridget didn't know that wildlife conservation was a career option in Zambia. She loved learning about nature, but there was a lack of local mentors to emulate. She eventually found those role models at ZCP, who gave her the opportunity to study painted dogs, lions, hyenas, and leopards. Bridget was accepted into WCN's Career Program in 2021 as part of its first cohort of rising wildlife leaders. This program supports

the professional growth of conservationists who live in the regions where they work so they can continue to be leading voices shaping the future of conservation in their home countries. Through the Career Program, Bridget receives financial support for additional education, access to additional mentorship opportunities, and training in project management, proposal writing, and fundraising.

Every day, Bridget heads to the field before sunrise while carnivores are still active, gathering behavioral data about important predator populations across South Luangwa National Park. ZCP operates Zambia's longest running carnivore conservation program, and Bridget's research helps ZCP protect fragile wildlife populations and foster coexistence with the communities living alongside them. In addition to monitoring pack and pride

health, she also creates carnivore distribution maps, removes poaching snares, immobilizes carnivores for radio collaring, and tracks their movements via radio telemetry. With roughly 21 painted dog packs and 20 lion prides in this region, Bridget's long-term monitoring is vital to informing conservation management policies and addressing immediate threats to these species.

Bridget dreams of not just excelling as a conservationist, but also paving the way for other young people eager to protect wildlife. Career Program support allowed Bridget to become what she longed for in her youth—a mentor for Zambia's next generation of budding conservationists. She developed an integrated field conservation course that gives students hands-on experience collaring carnivores, tracking their movements, making distribution maps from GPS coordinates, and practicing conflict reduction techniques. Six students have received in-depth field training so far; another 100 students have taken the introductory portion of her course, many of whom dream of following in Bridget's footsteps and working with ZCP.

Snapping another shot of the pack by the river, Bridget couldn't wait to share these new photos with her students. She is proud to be a part of



Zambia's new generation of wildlife leaders, helping her country become a model for locally-led conservation. With support from WCN's Career Program, Bridget will continue pursuing her dreams and encouraging that same passion in the hearts of her students. ■

The Career Program is part of WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders strategy, which provides scholarships and grants to local conservation leaders working in their home countries.





Ondrej Prosky

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