

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

- SUMMER 2024 -

PULLING BATS
FROM THE FIRE

WCN'S 2024 RISING
WILDLIFE LEADERS

LEADING LION
CONSERVATION WITH
PRIDE



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Pulling Bats From the Fire

Inieke Udokang and her colleagues readied their binoculars and slowly stepped into the darkness, the soft light from their headlamps casting hard shadows across the cave's stone facets. Before long, their lenses settled on several balls of fur with large ears clutched on a high ledge—a roost of short-tailed roundleaf bats, staring curiously at their new guests. Caves like this are the only reliable locations to monitor these endangered bats, making them incredibly important to the Small Mammal Conservation Organization (SMACON), WCN's newest Conservation Partner. But these caves and surrounding forests are repeatedly threatened by wildfires accidentally set by nearby farmers. To ensure these key habitats don't go up in smoke, Inieke's team works with communities to stop wildfires before they occur.

On a continent famous for its iconic large animals, SMACON protects little-known, highly vulnerable bat species in West Africa. Short-tailed roundleaf bats are the size of golf balls and weigh even less. Very few of these bats remain in seven forest caves across Nigeria, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea. SMACON protects and researches those found in four caves in Nigeria's Cross River National Park and Afi Mountain Wildlife Sanctuary. The bats need intact forest and undisturbed caves to thrive; if the bats deem a cave unsafe, they will leave that site and likely never return. Safeguarding their



Short-tailed roundleaf bats are some of the most endangered bats in the world.

caves is a top priority for SMACON, because if the bats abandon them, it will be difficult for the team to find them again, and for the bats to find suitable replacement roosts.

Wildfires pose the greatest danger to these bats. Thousands of farms surround the borders of these forests, and farmers commonly burn old brush on their property before planting crops. These fires often go untended or simply go wild, spreading to neighboring farms and devastating their livelihoods. Once the blaze

reaches the forest, there's no way to control its spread, threatening the bats and countless species that share their habitat, including gorillas, grey parrots, pangolins, and drill monkeys. If the bats detect even a hint of smoke at the mouth of their caves, they will flee for good.

Without intervention, fires can torch farms and forests for weeks. As SMACON's Community Engagement and Research Manager, Inieke works with local farmers to reduce wildfire frequency. The SMACON team created a color-coded wildfire warning system, placed on signs throughout villages to inform farmers of daily fire risk conditions. Inieke enlisted and supervises over 50 forest guardians from within these communities, who act as first responders to limit fire damage to farms and prevent fires from reaching the forests. She also leads local communities in the creation of firebreaks around the edge of the forests. Wildfires used to occur multiple times each year, but thanks to these community-led interventions from SMACON's fire prevention program, no wildfires have reached these forests for the last three years.

With Nigeria's caves now more secure, SMACON plans to expand their wildfire reduction work to communities near Cameroon's bat caves. By protecting habitat and empowering local people to lead the charge, SMACON is keeping Africa's endangered bats safe and at the forefront of people's minds. ■



Since pangolins share the same forests as these bats, WCN's Pangolin Crisis Fund issued a grant to SMACON to provide their forest guardians with motorcycles so they can respond rapidly and ferry water wherever wildfires occur.



Inieke Udokang (center) with community members who participate in SMACON's fire prevention program.

Shortly after SMACON first found Nigeria's short-tailed roundleaf bats in 2016, their team had to flee the forest in the middle of the night due to a wildfire. This opened their eyes to the intense danger that wildfires pose to the bats, and motivated them to create their fire prevention program.

Shown here are community members participating in a firebreak exercise.



WCN's 2024 Rising Wildlife Leaders

Through our Rising Wildlife Leaders strategy, WCN invests in local conservationists to strengthen their skills, advance their careers, and build their impact for wildlife. These are this year's recipients of our Scholarship and Career Programs, who will use this support to safeguard a diverse range of wildlife and shape conservation's future.

WCN awarded 9 Conservation Scholarships, 6 Veterinary Scholarships, and 1 Indigenous Scholarship, and supported 6 Career Program participants in 2024.

Conservation Scholars
Indigenous Scholars
Veterinary Scholars
Career Program

- 1** **AVERY TILLEY**
United States
Bison, Salmon, Caribou, Black-footed Ferret, Gray Wolf
- 2** **LUCERO MERCEDES HERNANI**
Bolivia
Emperor Tamarin
- 3** **ANNELISE SGARIONI**
Brazil
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross
- 4** **CAROLINE SOTTO MAYOR PADUA RODRIGUES**
Brazil
Woolly Spider Monkey

- 5** **MOUHAMADOU MODY NDIAYE**
Senegal
Lion
- 6** **ABRE SONHAYE-OUYE**
Togo
African Golden Cat
- 7** **EWAH EUPHEMIA FOSAB**
Cameroon
Pangolin
- 8** **DE ANDRE DELIE**
Namibia
Cheetah and Painted Dog
- 9** **BERCE NSAFUANSA**
Democratic Republic of Congo
Okapi

- 10** **DAVID KUVAWOGA**
Zimbabwe
Painted Dog
- 11** **NKAZIMULO LIMA**
Zimbabwe
Vultures
- 12** **PLACIDE MASENGESHO**
Rwanda
Grey Crowned Crane, Sitatunga Antelope, Bats
- 13** **CRISPUS SINGOMA**
Uganda
Nubian Giraffe, Elephant, African Buffalo, Lion, White and Black Rhinos, Antelopes, Leopard, Cheetah

- 14** **DOMINANT SAWE**
Tanzania
Pangolin
- 15** **HAGNESIO KUKUINE ANA CHIPONDE**
Mozambique
Rhino, Elephant, Pangolin and big cats
- 16** **AUGUSTO JUNIOR NHAMPOSSA**
Mozambique
Dugong and Elephant
- 17** **OSVALDO JACINTO ABRAO**
Mozambique
Hyena, Leopard, and Lion

- 18** **RACHEL NDABALA**
Zambia
Black Rhino
- 19** **REMMY KOPEKA**
Zambia
Pangolin
- 20** **ANDREW LEKISANYAL**
Kenya
Grevy's Zebra
- 21** **SHARON MULINDI**
Kenya
Elephant, Lion, Grevy's Zebra
- 22** **DERICK WANJALA**
Kenya
Elephant



Leading Lion Conservation with Pride



Wildlife Conservation Action

A farmer with a raised kraal, which protects her livestock from predators and promotes coexistence.

With a firm grip, Simbarashe Pride Chatikobo shook one of the pen's wooden struts, testing its stability. Fortunately, the raised platform of the kraal—a fortified enclosure for small livestock—did not budge, indicating that the training he facilitated for the farmers living near Zimbabwe's Matusadona National Park had been successful. Raising this farmer's kraal off the ground provides an added layer of defense against lions, hyenas, and leopards, who otherwise could prey on her goats. Raised kraals are just one human-carnivore coexistence strategy employed by Simbarashe, whose career with Wildlife Conservation Action (WCA) has also risen to new heights thanks to the support he receives from WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders Career Program.

Lions account for a significant portion of livestock predation around Matusadona, and retaliation from farmers has left their population unstable. Simbarashe strives to reduce

the frequency and severity of lion conflict incidents and fatalities, and to shield farmers from losing livestock that their livelihoods depend on. Getting these rural communities to



Wildlife Conservation Action

Simbarashe (left) with a member of a community he supports.

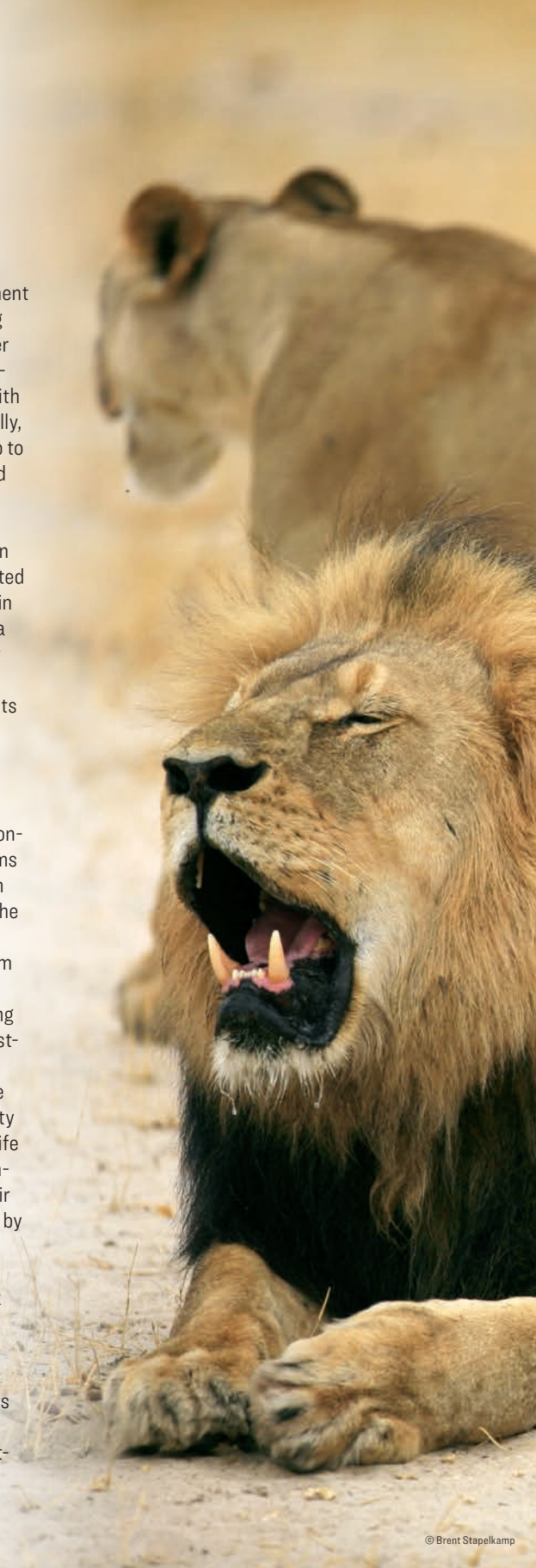
associate living alongside wildlife with benefits, not hardship, is at the core of Simbarashe's work—work that, a year ago, he wasn't certain that he could continue.

Although his work with WCA protects numerous carnivores, Simbarashe's focal species is the one he was named after—lions.

The high costs of living, field travel, and equipment once threatened to cut Simbarashe's promising career as a conservationist short. WCN's Career Program fosters career growth for local conservationists like Simbarashe by providing them with the resources they need to succeed, and crucially, to avoid switching professions. This includes up to three years of flexible financial support, tailored training and peer learning opportunities, and mentorship, all so these rising wildlife leaders can overcome institutional barriers and thrive in their careers. Support provided by WCN alleviated Simbarashe's financial stress at a critical time in his life, allowing him to continue his journey as a conservationist rather than pivoting to a career as a truck driver. He also networked with other conservationists in the Program to share insights and learn new skills like project management, advanced wildlife monitoring techniques, and grant writing.

These skills enabled Simbarashe to lead with confidence as the Human-Wildlife Conflict Programs Officer at WCA, where his team has grown from just two people to 30 in a single year. Simbarashe incorporates knowledge gained through WCN's Career Program into the strategies that his team employs—building raised kraals, constructing mobile canvas enclosures for livestock, installing predator deterrent lights around farms, and hosting conflict mitigation workshops. Most importantly, Simbarashe selects and supports people from within these communities to be Community Guardians who are trained to lead human-wildlife conflict interventions. Thanks to these interventions, lion conflict incidents with farmers in their project area around Matusadona have dropped by more than 57% in the last three years.

After helping raise her kraal, Simbarashe shook the farmer's hand, happy in the knowledge that both the goats and the lions now had a better chance at survival. Through skill-building and financial support, WCN's Rising Wildlife Leaders Career Program has significantly transformed Simbarashe's career and reinforced his commitment to conservation for years to come. ■





Join the wild at the

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EXPO

in San Francisco on October 5.
Learn more at wcnexpo.org

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

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We greatly appreciate your dedication to protecting wildlife. Your generous support is what makes wildlife conservation possible.

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WCN has received 4 stars and a **100% rating** from Charity Navigator, America's leading independent charity evaluator, making us one of the top-ranked wildlife conservation nonprofits in the world.

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