



Lilongwe, Malawi - Spotted Hyena Project:

Date: 7th November to 24th November 2019 **Veterinarian(s):** Dr Joel Alves

Location: Lilongwe and surrounds, Malawi

Operational Details:

After being contacted by Carnivore Research Malawi, who were desperate for a veterinarian to assist them with their Urban Hyena Project but did not have the funding available to pay for anyone to come across for an extended period of time, I got in contact with Joe from Nkombe Rhino and they were generous enough to get involved in the project by funding a large portion of the operational expense of the project.

This allowed me to spend just over two weeks there, attempting to collar individuals who were living within the city limits and had even made the presidents residential estate, one of their more frequented locations. They disappear in the daylight but by night are roaming the city streets, on the prowl for what little natural prey remains in islands of non-human dominated habitat. When I say islands, they are often no greater than a square kilometre. They travel large distances in and among the residential areas, often at great risk of being hit by cars when traversing the city. This has likely been one of the main reasons for the decline in the urban hyena population.

The plan of the project was to collar as many individuals as possible which is a lot easier said than done with a population which can be so difficult to find and see, let alone dart and collar. We employed a number of techniques, including foot-hold traps which were partly successful. The reason they were partly successful, is that after baiting an area for a

few nights and using camera traps to ascertain when they started visiting it, we started placing and setting the traps.

Unfortunately, one of the more curious and less aware youngsters got himself caught instead of one of the adults. We had to immobilise him to release him from the trap but it was not completely wasted as we got a full set of identification photographs, measurements and biological samples.

Once that area was disturbed though, we could not re-attempt the traps as the adults are far too clever, wary and essentially street smart. This meant attempting call ups and stakeouts at bait sites. Many all nighters eventually paid dividends as we managed to dart and adult female in the gardens of the presidents estate. We managed to place a collar and a few weeks later that collar identified a new, unknown den site outside the city limits.

Due to a number of factors related to the capacity for monitoring and collars which were starting to give issues, we decided to rather focus on two individuals who had to be desperately caught and immobilised for treatment. One had a wire snare around its neck and the other had a collar, whose drop off mechanism failed and therefore it had grown too tight and needed to be taken off. We shifted all our focus to these two hyena and decided against placing anymore collars until those individuals were taken care of.

Once again, many sleepless nights, endless follow ups on leads and eventually, after calling it quits the one morning at 03:00, we were driving down one of the city's main roads, and there in-front of us strolling straight down quiet road was a hyena. After slowly driving past it, we realised it was the snared individual.

Our sleep deprived states could barely believe it. I quickly loaded a dart, we made a u-turn and nonchalantly pretend to drive back past. After a sudden stop, I managed to get a dart in. It was so interested in the dart in its shoulder that was luckily just out of reach, that instead of running away, which we were concerned about, it ran in circles trying to get the dart, eventually falling asleep in-front of a church, 50m from where we darted it.

It was a massive stroke of fortune, three days before I was destined to depart and after two and a half weeks of effort, we were incredibly relieved to successfully capture her. After cutting the wire snare and treating the wounds, she was woken up and left to continue her early

morning amble through town. Because it was a strange sight on the side of the road at 03:30 in the morning, we had an army vehicle pull up to investigate, with no less than 12 armed men.

They were truly fascinated by what was unfolding and I am sure it is one of the stranger instances they have come across in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we only got a brief glimpse of the one whose collar we needed to remove and I was not able to dart her before she bolted off. She remains out there and still requiring assistance.

She has become the priority for CRM and hopefully they won't be attempting to place anymore collars until that collar is removed from that female. All in all, it was a very successful project as they had never had so many hyena captured in such a short space of time. It was largely in part to the great team I had across there with me, who put in a monumental effort and are likely still catching up on the sleep we missed.

It would have not been at all possible for me to get across there, with the right equipment too, to assist in this project were it not for the amazing support from Nkombe Rhino and their respective donors. A huge thanks goes out to them and I look forward to working together with them on many more projects.

Dr Joel Alves (BVSc)