



AFRICAN HUNTING DOG



Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Carnivora; Family: Canidae
Lycaon pictus

Size of average adult:

Height: 30 inches at the shoulder

Weight: 40 - 80 pounds (SCZ).

Habitat: prefers open woodland and plains

Range: Found today in isolated populations south of the Sahara.

Status: ENDANGERED

There are only an estimated 3,000-5,000 African hunting dogs left in the wild.



Threats to survival:

- “Wild dogs are uniquely susceptible to **habitat fragmentation** due to their very large home ranges” (IUCN-CSG).
- Wild dogs are also **shot, snared, poisoned, and killed by road traffic**.
- **Competition with larger carnivores** keeps wild dogs' numbers low, so that even the largest habitat fragments may contain populations too small to be viable (IUCN-CSG).
- Wild dogs are **susceptible to domestic dog diseases** such as rabies and distemper. The presence of human populations near wild dog populations dramatically increases the disease risk to wild dogs, because domestic dogs serve as a reservoir for the diseases (IUCN-CSG).
- Several remaining African wild dog populations are **smaller populations** (~ 50 individuals). “Insulated from threats, such populations stand a decent chance of persisting for the next 50 years. They are, however, **extremely vulnerable to change**: a small increase in either adult or juvenile mortality greatly increases the probability of extinction. Thus direct persecution, disease, road accidents, accidental snaring and lion predation each represents a serious threat to populations of this size” (IUCN-CSG).
- **Commercial cattle ranching** poses a threat to African wild dogs. In Botswana, a series of fences were constructed to help protect cattle from exposure to disease from native wildlife. “These fences have cut off ancient animal migration routes” (Conniff 59). Cattle farmers are also allowed to kill dogs that threaten their stock. “According to a recent report from the University of Botswana, the economic benefits of the European subsidy program have gone almost exclusively to commercial ranches controlled by the nation’s wealthy ruling elite, not to rural villagers” (Conniff 59).

Diet in the wild: African wild dogs primarily prey on small to medium-sized antelope (Thomson's gazelle, kudu, reedbeek, impala, wildebeest). “Wild dogs also take small prey such as hares, lizards and even eggs, but these probably make a fairly small contribution to their diet” (IUCN-CSG).

Special features:

- African hunting dogs are **also called** African wild dogs or Cape hunting dogs.
- “Each hunting dog has its own **unique markings** of black, yellow, brown and white” (SCZ).
- African hunting dogs have **very large, round ears**.
- African hunting dogs are **not hyenas**. Hyenas are a different species, and are classified in their own family (Hyaenidae). Hunting dogs are a type of wild dog and are classified in the family Canidae.
- Interestingly, African hunting dogs “are only distantly related to other canids (dogs). Fossils suggest that the African wild dog split from the ancestor of other canids like wolves and jackals three million years ago” (Conniff 43).
- **Predators** of wild dogs include lions, leopards, hyenas, and crocodiles, with lions posing the greatest threat.



- African wild dogs are able to pursue prey at speeds of **25 miles per hour**, and are capable of bursts of speed up to 35 m.p.h.

Behavior:

- “Wild dogs **most closely resemble wolves in their social behavior**” (Conniff 41). However, some biologists who study African wild dogs feel that they are **more “gentle” and “easygoing” with each other**. “Where wolves would enforce their hierarchy by snarling and showing their teeth, you can’t help but notice how quiet and cooperative the dogs seem to be in the same context” (Conniff 53).
- African wild dogs typically travel **in packs of about 10** individuals” (Conniff 53). “A wild dog pack should be thought of not as a static social unit but as **a group with continuously changing membership**.” While the pack may not change from day to day or week to week, the pack’s composition does vary from year to year (“with the exception of the initial breeding group that started the pack”) (McNutt 17).
- Wild dogs **communicate** through scent marking, visual cues and vocalizations.
- African wild dogs are basically **nomadic** (except during the denning season), and “seldom staying in one place for more than a day or two” (Conniff 54).
- Wild dogs are **cooperative hunters**. “Subordinate adults are often the most experienced and successful hunters. They routinely initiate the chases and may often make a kill by themselves before returning to collect the rest of the pack” (McNutt 32).
- African wild dogs are **diurnal**, meaning they have basically two main periods of activity each day. “At first light of dawn and last light of dusk, the pack routinely gathers, greets and starts off through its home range in search of prey” (McNutt 33).
- African wild dog **home ranges** vary throughout different parts of Africa from 175 square miles in the Okavango in Botswana to nearly 800 square miles in the Serengeti.

Breeding & Care of Young:

- **Only the dominant male and female reproduce** in most packs.
- The gestation period for African wild dogs is roughly 10 weeks.
- The female “selects and expands an **underground den** abandoned by warthogs, porcupines, or hyenas, usually choosing a different den each year” (Conniff 43). The pups will spend the first three months of their life in the den.
- **Litter sizes** may vary from 2-21 pups, with an **average of 10**.
- With such large litters, help from other pack members is necessary for the pups to survive. **Other pack members of both sexes help care for the pups** by “babysitting” while the mother leaves the den to hunt and by regurgitating food for the pups to feed on.
- Pups begin to travel and hunt with the pack at 3-4 months of age.
- **Both sexes leave the pack at 1-2 years of age** (SCZ).

Efforts to save African wild dogs:

The IUCN Canid Specialist Group has identified priorities and factors for the conservation of African wild dogs. “Maintaining large (> 10,000 square km) contiguous tracts of land set aside for wildlife represents the single most important strategy for wild dog conservation.” Programs are needed to resolve conflicts between people and wild dogs. In “highly fragmented landscapes”, the establishment of tiny populations in small, fenced reserves may be the only way to conserve wild dogs” in those areas (IUCN-CSG).

Reintroduction of wild dogs is challenging because “suitable release sites are in short supply: few reserves are sufficiently large and well-protected to sustain viable wild dog populations. Protection of existing populations remains a higher priority for Africa-wide wild dog conservation” (IUCN-CSG). Captive wild dogs do play an important role by allowing biologists to learn more about the dogs and to increase public awareness and sympathy for the plight of wild dogs.

Recommended web site: IUCN Canid Specialist Group web site
<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~wcruiinfo/csgweb/sppaccts/awilddog.htm>

