

# WILDLIFE ACTION GROUP THUMA TELEGRAPH MAY 2017

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May 2017

Dear Donors, friends and supporters

It's been a long time since we last gave you an update from Malawi.

Lots has happened in the last 9 months of which you will read later in this newsletter.

After two years of little or no rains Malawi experienced lots of rain which has brought excellent crop outputs for most Malawians and most rivers and streams are once again flowing for the first time in over a year. The lake levels had dropped dramatically and it has risen but is still lower than previous years.

Saying all of that, Thuma Forest and Dedza Salima Forest has really benefitted. All our rivers and stream are flowing, springs pumping water again and the wildlife all look fat with glistening coats.

January 2017 saw the passing of the amendment of the National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) Act . This initiative was started on the 4<sup>th</sup> October 2013 during the International elephant march. Malawi joined along with many cities all over the world as people joined together to raise awareness of the current plight of elephants worldwide.

The David Sheldrick trust spear headed this idea as the illegal trade and demand for ivory continued to rise and death figures showed that every 15 minutes one elephant was killed.



In Malawi, WAG along with other conservation bodies such as WESM and Lilongwe Wildlife Trust lobbied parliament and handed over petitions asking government to amend the DNPW Act, advocating for stiffer penalties so the it would become a real deterrent to would be poachers. The Department of National Parks and wildlife along with Lilongwe Wildlife Trust have worked incredibly hard to make the amendments to the Act and have it passed in Parliament. Fantastic work from you guys.

In January 2017 the amendment was passed and we have a new Act which reflects the seriousness of crimes and very importantly shows that the Government of Malawi is really doing everything to protect its wildlife. Its seems a long time ago now!

I trust you will enjoy the updates and we really appreciate all your continued support.

Warmest regards

Lynn and Scouts

September 2016

On 29th of September while driving out of Thuma I stopped to allow a herd of elephants cross the road. I was late but stayed some one hour taking photos and enjoying watching these gentle giants browse close to the road. I don't often get opportunities to stop and enjoy so I sat on the top of the car and smiled to myself. I have the best job in the world and at that moment I felt I was the luckiest person alive. Little did I know that 24 hours later life would not feel quite the same.



I was on my way to Lilongwe, as WAG had hired a gyrocopter to carry out an Ariel survey over both reserves. We had been hit with a spate of killings of elephants. Five elephants had been killed in a short period of time, and we needed to see if we had more carcasses that had not yet been found and also maybe could see if we still had poachers inside the reserve.



We left KIA (the international airport) early the next morning. The flight to the boundary of Thuma was a bit scary but as soon as we reached Thuma boundaries, I forgot the fear and became very excited. The first thing I saw was the scouts in the vehicle along the road to Camp Rea. The car stopped and looked up, and we waved to each other. Next we saw elephants close to Nkholombe Hill. We continued down towards Dedza Salima Reserve. We saw many elephants some encroachment, but no sign of any dead

elephants. As we turned back to continue to survey Thuma Forest, we crossed over the Linthiphe river and saw a herd of elephants. We circled around to get better photos. As we started to move on, the pilot turned to me and said he thought we had a problem with the aircraft.

The rest is history. I remember my arm hitting trees, as we crashed to the ground and next I woke up on the ground trapped with the aircraft on top of me and fuel pouring over me. The pilot was further away on the ground with blood on his face and said he thought he had broken his ankles.

WAG scouts were the first on the scene and administered first aid, supplied water and the likes, and then we had great help from the pilot's family who came with stretchers and further assistance. It was over 8 hours before we reached hospital.

Both myself and the pilot are extremely lucky to be alive and we thank everyone who assisted us throughout this terrible time, and afterwards for all their support and kind thoughts. The kindness and goodwill was incredible. Thank God both of us are alive, but both of us will carry long term physical disabilities for life.

I have been back in Thuma now for about two months and despite the accident I still feel I have the best job in the world.

## MALAWI DEFENCE FORCE (MDF) TRAINS IN THUMA AND HELPS THE CONSERVATION EFFORT

Malawi Defense Forces have a long history of supporting the UN peace missions in other countries. Malawi is one of the three nations FIB mandated by the UN to engage in direct fighting against armed rebel groups. They are regarded as one of the most disciplined and professional in this field. Each year brave Malawian soldiers go overseas on peace keeping missions.



In Senga Bay close to Salima is MAFCO which is the training base for soldiers.

In February 2017 MDF came to Thuma to conduct some pre- deployment training in preparation for a mission to DRC. This included long patrols, observation posts and orientation exercises.

We were delighted they choose Thuma to carry out this task and they also allowed WAG scouts to take part in some of the training exercises.



in 3 different patrols.

We have continued to do regular patrols in this area and have seen some reductions in the amount of illegal activity over the last month.

We wish all MDF soldiers who will be leaving for DRC to be safe and return back to Malawi soon.

While the MDF were in Thuma doing their exercises, WAG scouts patrolled areas that are known charcoal hotspots, places that are known for poachers to retaliate and in some cases fight scouts. With the MDF being in the area to support if necessary, we pushed forward and tackled the problem head on.

Over 18 people were arrested by WAG scouts



## FOREST INVENTORY FUNDED BY CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIP FUND



Protection of natural resources is becoming more and more important as a form of protecting hills and rivers, reducing soil erosion and mitigating climate change. Sound forest management depends on the quality and quantity of the information available. There has been no data of this kind to date ever recorded in TFR or DSFR.

With funding through CEPF, this is the first Forest Inventory of this type to have been carried out in both Thuma Forest Reserve and Dedza Salima Escarpment.

It will provide a base line on all forest stocks, help us to identify key hotspots for orchids and provide invaluable training for our scouts. This forest inventory will provide information of the whole area as well as qualitative/quantitative information of the stock.

This, in turn, will assist WAG in making good, informed, management decisions.

DSFR is listed as a Key Bio diverse Area (KBA), however TFR, despite being adjacent to DSFR, is not listed. Besides compiling a up-to-date inventory of trees and orchids in both reserves, this data will demonstrate the uniqueness of TFR biodiversity, identifying it as a biological priority upgrading TFR to a KBA.

**The main aim of this project was to carry out base line surveys in both reserves which would result in;**

- Increased knowledge of the tree and orchid diversity and distribution within DSFR
- Increased knowledge of the orchid diversity and distribution within TFR
- Increased scientific Forest Inventory capacity of WAG scouts, notably in terms of vegetation ID and surveys.
- Extension of Key Biodiverse Area (KBA) MW1 to include TFR



The TFR/DSFR inventory was successfully concluded on Friday 24th February 2017.

We are waiting for the analysis of the results which should be available by July this year.

## CAMERA TRAPS CONTINUE TO ASSIST US - Baby time!

In 2013 we set up the first camera traps in Thuma and Dedza forest. These first traps were brought to us by John and Holly Pemberton. Then Derek Dwane brought additional traps out to us in late 2013.



In that first few years we captured some nice photos, but it was few and far between.



In 2016 the camera traps are still being used. And we are capturing photos of new species and last year seeing lots of signs of population growth. Here are a few photos which prove but the fact that our populations are increasing.





## VOLUNTEERS AT WORK

These days we see a lot of negative press about volunteer programs and the negative impacts it can have on the wildlife (petting projects) and bad experiences for the volunteer.

WAG has been running a small volunteer program since the beginning (early 2000). And we are still in touch with many of these volunteers. In fact many are returning, some even after ten years. This is the

lasting impact and memory of their experience here.

Our project is very much a hands on working project. We do not make up things for people to do.



Volunteers come here and help us with our day to day work, which take on many shapes and forms.

What you will be sure of is a true African experience, basic bush living and lots of hard work. You will become part of something tangible. Volunteers

become part of our day to day operations, but every day is different! James Randle for example has researched, created and published a reference book on Trees of Thuma Forest (see photo). Alex from Belgium has worked on our accounts and reporting systems, streamlining them. Reto has been working on photographing many insects. Anne Sophie worked in local schools educating on waste disposal and some schools now have recycle and compose bins. Sue from New Zealand has taken part in setting up a butterfly survey and photo reference. That is only to name some of the project volunteers have taken part in.

Not only do volunteers get to know and understand the challenges facing conservation projects but they also leave knowing they have made a valuable contribution to our work here.

Our volunteer program not only gives someone an opportunity to come to Africa and contribute to the conservation effort, it also will leave them with the lasting taste, feel and memories of Africa, its beauties and its beasts!

We thank and salute all our past volunteers and look forward to our new volunteers coming this year.

Check out our web site [www.wag-malaiw.org](http://www.wag-malaiw.org)



## A NEW BULL ELEPHANT ARRIVES IN THUMA

Only three days after I arrived back to work I received a phone call at 5am on Sunday morning. The local police station wanted to report that a elephant was outside the reserve and would we come quickly to return it to it back to the reserve.

When I heard that the elephant was currently in a particular place I was very surprised and something did not seem quite right as this bull was very far from the boundary of Thuma and I had never experienced one of our elephants being that far from home.

I quickly checked the status of the fence line with our fence attendants to see it was broken. It wasn't. We had not received any reports from our local community so it seemed this was not one of the elephants from Thuma.



So I called the nearest Wildlife Reserve Nkhotakota and enquired if they knew if they had one elephant outside the reserve. It was confirmed that over three days ago, a herd of bull elephants had broken the fence line and they had managed to return 4 but one was missing. They were very sure this elephant, who was now close to Salima was the same elephant that had come from their Reserve.

This bull was some 90 kms from his original place,. We offered our assistance as we were closer to the escapee. We

could go directly to the area, and assess the situation while waiting from them to get to the place.

We set out from Thuma and as we got closer to the place we saw hundreds of people also going in the same direction. The word was out....an elephant was about!

WAG scouts and DNPW rangers located the elephant and did their best to do crowd control and limit the possible bad outcome of someone being injured.

African Parks sent a helicopter to the scene along with a vehicle. It was quickly decided that it would not be possible to drive this bull back to Nkhotakota and the best solution would be to try drive it into Thuma forest which was closer.

This whole process and carried out with precision and expertise . The fence line around Thuma was lowered and the bull entered safely and nobody was injured.

That same night one of our camps received a visitor in the shape of the new bull! He walked up to the scouts kitchen, as scouts scattered into their houses, and he continued to rob their tomatoes and cucumbers that were just inside the kitchen door.!

He has been seen once since and we hope he decides to stay with us but if he wishes to go then, as our fence line is still incomplete, he will be free to leave and continue his journey.

Check out our web site [www.wag-malawi.org](http://www.wag-malawi.org) and donate to help us to continue to erect the solar powered fence line.



## Brief update on activities

### Average patrols per month in Thuma FR

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Patrols	24.17	27.67	46.58	60.63	74.5	87.5

Number of KMs walked in 2016 12,535km.

### FRIENDLY BULL BARAK

In 2016 we started frequently seeing two bulls hanging around camp. We started filling our water hole and lo and behold they started having mud baths on a regular basis.

Our Christmas visitors were very excited to wake up and find Barak, one of the bulls, standing outside their huts early each morning.

Over the last month Barak has been extremely brave and come right into camp. He visits each site - scout's houses, the volunteer camp, the office area, and at night and early morning he hangs around my grass hut.



He is pretty cool and calm and does not mind people bring around. We have some great shots of him hanging around the volunteer camp last Sunday.

Even the scouts are very excited to see him and everyone

goes to have a look and take some photos.

Reminds me of another famous Barak who is pretty cool and friendly :)



### GUN POACHERS ARRESTED

We have been seeing some very decent outcomes of some of our arrests especially relating to hunting.

April 2016, one man found in possession of a protected specimen was sentenced to 4 years in jail. This quickly put a stop to the influx of people dealing in fake ivory.

November 2016 saw a gun poacher receive 6 years jail sentence

December 2016 another gun poacher got 3 years jail sentence

February saw a brilliant arrest of three men involved in gun poaching at Thuma forest reserve. A local informer tipped us off that some poachers would be coming to enter the reserve one night. The scouts set up an ambush and managed to arrest all three. Our local prosecutor Mr Andersine brought them to court and all three were sentenced to 3 years hard labour in jail.



With these kind of sentence we are hoping that hunting with firearms will reduce.

Also with the new DNPW Act coming into effect in January 2017, the penalties are much harsher. If someone is convicted of killing an elephant for example there is no option of a fine being given, and the sentence will be 30 year imprisonment.

With this in mind and funding received from Elephant crisis fund, WAG have just held our 3rd yearly work shop for our major law enforcement partners at base camp. We gave an over view of last year's arrests and sentences. We also introduced the new Act.

The next phase of this process is to sensitize our local communities by visiting each area and letting people know of the change in the law. These new penalties will have a serious negative impact for local people and their families if they are caught. So it is only correct that they should know the consequences of carrying out illegal activities so they can make informed decisions about whether to chance being caught inside the forest doing something they should not.

WAG will also be creating a simple booklet in chetwere which will be distributed nationwide to help spread the word and act as a deterrent.

More on this in our next newsletter.

**Photographers – Lynn, Reto, Liz, Sue, ALEX**

**SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR DONORS**



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