



AERIAL SURVEILLANCE UNIT

MONTHLY REPORT
MARCH 2017



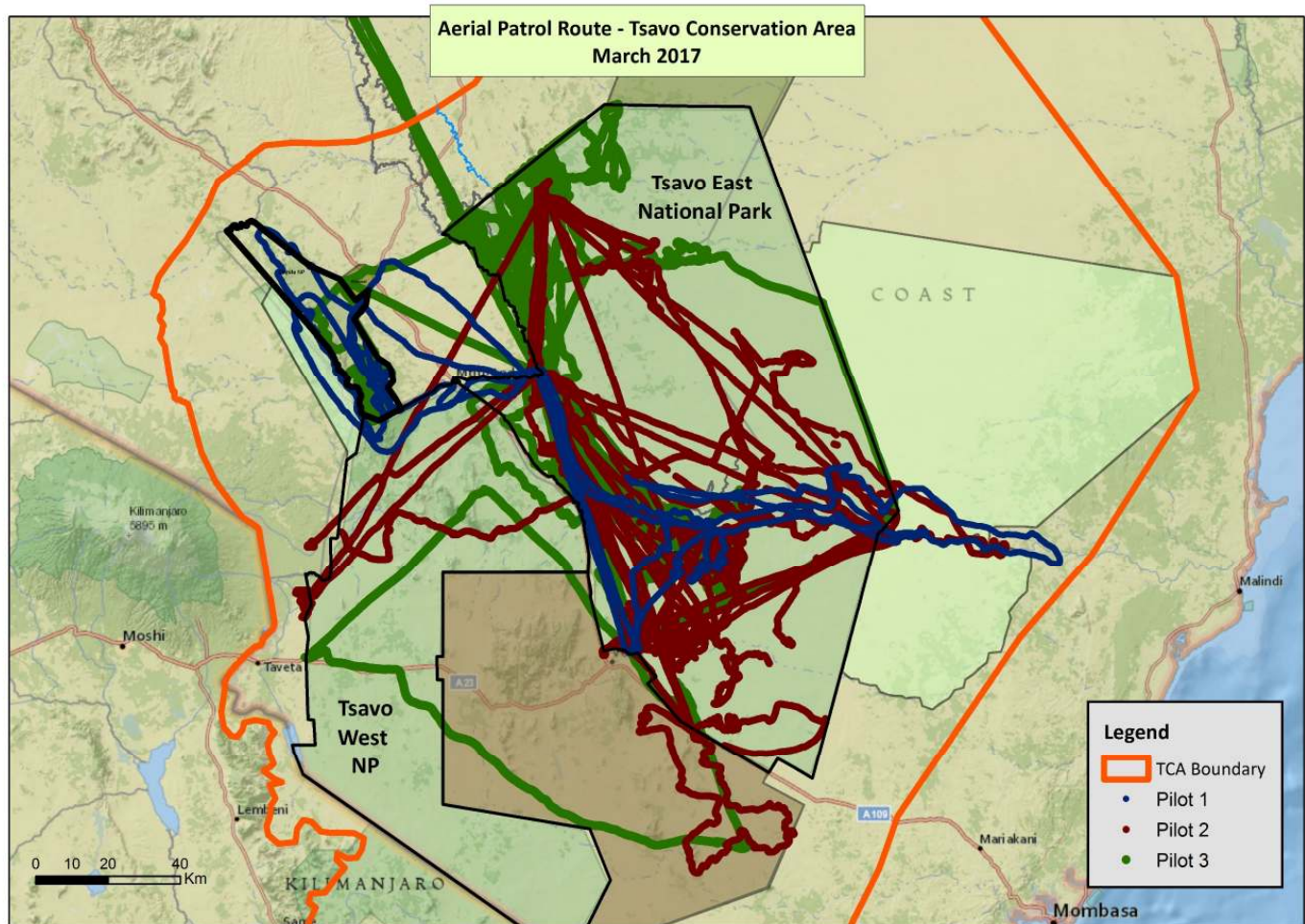


AERIAL STATISTICS

MARCH 2017

HOURS FLOWN	109.3
KMS COVERED	12,637
AREAS PATROLLED	Tsavo East, West, Meru National Park, Galana Ranch, Taita Ranches





The DSWT's Aerial Unit observed a disturbing rise in elephant poaching in the month of March. Several factors may be contributing to this, including severe drought, which has affected much of the country, and the upcoming general elections in August. The last peak in poaching preceded the 2012 elections, so it is believed there is some connection. In total, nine carcasses were discovered from the air, six of which appear to have died this year and another three that were over a year old, but which still had ivory intact. Of the six carcasses that were most recent, ivory was recovered from two of them, whilst the other three already had their ivory removed by poachers. Although only a small victory, it is a consolation to have reached two of the carcasses before the poachers did.





MONTHLY AERIAL SUMMARY

As most of the carcasses were discovered in the same general area, the helicopter focused a lot of attention here, making landings with rangers to try and pick up fresh signs of humans. Footprints of two men were found on one occasion and followed several kilometres before being lost amongst rocky ground on top of the Yatta Plateau. A shooting blind was also discovered in the area and destroyed, and although these poachers were never apprehended, we have a high degree of confidence that the increased activity both from the air and from the ground has caused the poachers retreat.

Earlier in the month, KWS did make contact with a gang of poachers and tragically the life of Tsavo East's Company Commander was lost in the gun battle. Another officer was injured in the fight and airlifted by one of the DSWT's Super Cubs to Voi where he could receive medical attention. Fortunately, he is expected to make a full recovery. Prior to his extraction, two of the poachers were gunned down, and the remaining two were also shot dead later in the fight.



A fresh elephant carcass with tusks already removed by poachers



An older elephant carcass with tusks intact

To the north of Tsavo East along the Yatta, the helicopter was instrumental in discovering another shooting blind, three active harbours and a snare. One such discovery led to the successful apprehension of a poisoned arrow poacher.

In terms of illegal grazing of livestock in the park the Kenya Wildlife Service's efforts on the ground have begun to yield results, and although there is still a significant problem with livestock in some areas of the park, other areas have notably improved. Sustained pressure, especially during the dry months, will be essential to build on these gains.

Also during the month, the helicopter conducted a two-day operation in support of the Kenya Wildlife Service in Meru National Park and the surrounding protected areas to survey the rhino population and lookout for any other illegal activity. Illegal livestock was noted in the park but thankfully no other illegal activity was observed.





Keeping pressure on livestock herders illegally entering the Park

This month a veterinary treatment was also facilitated in Ithumba by the helicopter. A visiting wild bull elephant had been seen at the mud bath by DSWT staff with a poisoned arrow injury on its flank. After darting the elephant from the helicopter, an arrow was extracted from the wound and following thorough irrigation and a dose of long-lasting antibiotics, Dr. Poghon gave the bull a good prognosis. Without the helicopter this job would not have been possible, since as soon as Dr. Poghon approached the elephant in the relatively open space around the mud bath, it immediately moved off into very thick bush, which was inaccessible by vehicle.





The poisoned arrow removed from the bull elephant



The Aerial Unit was also involved in the search for a young elephant with an injury to its leg that had been sighted by a tour operator near Kanderi Swamp. After sighting the calf from the air, it was darted along with its mother for safety reasons, and found to be suffering from an old dislocation. Dr. Poghon did what he could for the calf, but ultimately the dislocation could not be remedied, and since the calf has already adapted to life with a deformed leg, the two elephants were revived and reunited without major intervention.

On the 21st of March, a baby elephant was sighted from a DSWT Super Cub wandering around on its own near Voi. A ground team was immediately deployed to monitor it on the ground and try and ascertain whether its family was nearby. Unfortunately, it was confirmed that the baby had in fact been orphaned. With coordination from the air, and the assistance of experienced elephant keepers from DSWT's Voi stockade, the calf was successfully rescued and later transported to the DSWT Nairobi Nursery where it is thriving.



An elephant calf with an old dislocation



An orphaned elephant was rescued and taken to the DSWT Nairobi Nursery

Despite the increase in poaching activity, there were many highlights in the month of March, particularly sightings of big cats. The most dramatic sighting was of a pride of lion zeroing in on a cornered buffalo on the Tiva River, seen by the helicopter. The buffalo was trying to protect its calf, which had been caught by the same pride of lions, and found itself trapped with its back against a large rock and the lions blocking its only escape. The helicopter's landing in the riverbed beside the action distracted the lions for long enough for the buffalo to escape, but not before the pilot was able to snap a few pictures.

Sightings of wild dog continue to increase and on one morning two different aircraft sighted separate packs of wild dogs, independently. The increasing frequency of sightings of this endangered predator is a really positive indicator of the improving health of the ecosystem. Sightings of leopards seem to also be on the rise; and this month, one of our pilots was treated to a front-seat show of a beautiful specimen in the middle of a hunt, while another one of our pilots witnessed three leopards cross in front of him while taxiing down the Trust's Kaluku airfield!









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