

TRAVEL

How African wild dogs became a safari star

As safari-goers look beyond the big five, endangered African wild dogs are emerging as one of the continent's most sought-after sightings. These camps have turned the limelight into sustained conservation support.



| Gorongosa National Park is now home to more than 300 African wild dogs. CHARLIE HAMILTON JAMES, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

By Alexandra Owens
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Bernard Monnaapula, my guide at [Gomoti Plains](#), and I have been trailing a male leopard across the Okavango Delta for more than an hour when we realize it has led us to an unexpected prize: African wild dogs. We watch as the pack chases the startled cat up a tree, away from their fresh impala kill, marveling at our luck. There's a saying in the safari industry: You don't find wild dogs. Wild dogs find you.

That elusiveness is a reason wild dogs have become one of Africa's most thrilling and sought-after sightings. "[Finding them] is a bit like finding a needle in a haystack—except the needle's moving around 10 miles a day," says [Matthew Smith Becker](#), chief executive officer of [Zambian Carnivore Programme \(ZCP\)](#). "They're one of the crown jewels of safaris."

Highly social and relentless hunters, African wild dogs—also known as painted wolves or Cape hunting dogs—are also among the most endangered mammals on Earth. An estimated [6,000 to 7,000](#) remain in the wild, threatened by habitat loss, human conflict, and disease.

While many first-time travelers seek out the "Big Five"—a term rooted in 19th-century trophy hunting—an increasing number of seasoned safari-goers are prioritizing lesser-known animals. Few inspire the same devotion as wild dogs, known for their playful interactions and fascinating pack behavior, including [sneezing to initiate a hunt](#).

For the wild dogs, the attention translates into real conservation gains. "Wildlife

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tourism is having a positive impact on the species,” says J.W. “Tico” McNutt, [Wild Entrust](#) co-founder and director. “People immediately connect with wild dogs. There’s an innate love for them once you see them in action.”

(I set out to witness the world's most incredible wildlife spectacle—here's what happened)



| Waterbuck herds on the flood plain of Gorongosa National Park.
CHARLIE HAMILTON JAMES, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

From vermin to safari star

As recently as the 1980s, African wild dogs were culled inside national parks based on the misconception that they depleted antelope numbers. “They were considered vermin and shot on sight,” says McNutt. “Bounties were placed on them.”

Protected status—African wild dogs have been listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List since 1990—alongside natural history documentaries and public awareness campaigns have revealed their true nature and helped elevate the once-maligned predators’ reputation.

“Over the last decade our guests have become more environmentally aware and knowledgeable about endangered animals like wild dogs,” says Kim Nixon, [Chobe Holdings Limited](#)’s chief operational officer, who has fielded requests to helicopter guests to nearby camps when wild dogs are sighted.

Travelers are willing to go to extraordinary lengths—and expense—for a chance to photograph the charismatic carnivores. “At [Great Plains Conservation](#), we have guests who fly around Africa on wild dog safaris,” says founder and filmmaker [Dereck Joubert](#). “If I say, ‘This area is also great for rhino,’ they aren’t interested.”

Tourism meets conservation

African wild dogs’ survival has become increasingly intertwined with tourism. “As with most other species, the biggest threat to wild dogs results from the loss of suitable habitat,” says Vince Shacks, [Wilderness](#) group head of impact. “Tourism helps create economic justification for large tracts of land to not be handed over to other commercial land uses such as agriculture or mineral exploitation.”

Camps in wild dog strongholds—such as [The Bushcamp Company](#) in Zambia’s South Luangwa National Park and [Ker & Downey Botswana](#)—partner with NGOs like ZCP

and Wild Entrust, funding on-the-ground conservation efforts through bed-night levies, promoting public awareness, and directly donating critical resources, including GPS collars and field vehicles. Some outfitters, including Wilderness, maintain independent fundraising arms to support conservation and research.



People travel in a mokoro on a safari in Gomoti Plains Camp in Botswana's Okavango Delta.
FABIAN VON POSER, IMAGEBROKER, GETTY IMAGES

Tourism provides critical eyes on the ground. Guides who traverse the same landscapes daily share sightings, monitor snares, and report behavioral data to scientists. “We can’t be everywhere at once,” says Becker. “Their sightings can provide information that’s vital to our work.” In Botswana, Wild Entrust’s African Carnivore Wildbook tool enables tourists to share their own photographs to an AI-powered citizen science platform that tracks individual wild dogs across the Delta.

Creating wild dog strongholds

Throughout Africa, wild dog populations remain fragmented and vulnerable to human pressure, genetic bottlenecks, and disease. Yet some safari outfitters are helping reverse that trend by rewilding local ecosystems.

In Mozambique’s Gorongosa National Park, where more than 90 percent of large mammals were lost during the civil war (1977-1992), wild dogs are now thriving thanks to decades of investment by the Gorongosa Restoration Project. The park currently supports roughly 300 dogs, bolstered by abundant prey such as waterbuck.

(How one of Africa’s great parks is rebounding from war)

In neighboring Zimbabwe, Joubert intervened when a pack of wild dogs preying on livestock faced euthanasia in 2025. He offered to relocate the pack to Tembo Plains Camp in Sapi Reserve, a former hunting concession adjacent to Mana Pools National Park. All 17 dogs—including nine newborn pups—survived the move, which also addressed population decline in Mana Pools, most likely due to inbreeding.

“Wild dog numbers around Mana Pools have been dwindling; there’s been no recruitment from other packs or vagrant dogs coming in,” says Joubert. “This relocation helps introduce new bloodlines and stabilize the population.”

Project Loeto is an ambitious trans-border initiative from Wilderness—scheduled to launch in 2026—that aims to safeguard wildlife corridors through monitoring, research, and wildlife-human co-existence programs across the vast Kavango–Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA), the largest contiguous landscape occupied by wild dogs.

“Wild dogs and many other species are able to thrive in protected wildlife areas, but at some stage, they will need to expand their territory outwards,” says Shacks. “This is where serious attention and resources are needed for their long-term protection.”

(Would you dare to trek through Zambia's 'Valley of the Leopard'?)



| Spotted hyena seen patrolling early in the morning in South Luangwa National Park in Zambia.
CHRIS SCHMID, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

A new breed of citizen science

As interest in wild dogs grows, camps are inviting travelers to engage directly in conservation. Beginning this April in Zambia’s Lower Zambezi National Park where [Chiawa Safaris](#) has supported wild dog research for more than two decades, visitors may join ecologists from [Conservation Lower Zambezi](#) in the field, helping identify pack members, observing collaring operations or, occasionally witnessing snare removals.

Similar models are emerging elsewhere. [Gorongosa Safaris](#) offers a behind-the-scenes experience with wild dog scientists, including demonstrations of satellite collars and EarthRanger tracking software with exclusive access to den sites when conditions allow. In Botswana’s Okavango Delta, [Natural Selection Tawana](#) partners with Wild Entrust to arrange visits to the NGO’s research camp and host scientists on game drives, offering real-time insight into monitoring efforts.

Together, these experiences reflect a broader shift in safari tourism: from passive observation to meaningful participation. For wild dogs—whose survival depends on intensive monitoring, sustained funding, and public advocacy—informed and engaged guests are becoming an essential part of the conservation story.

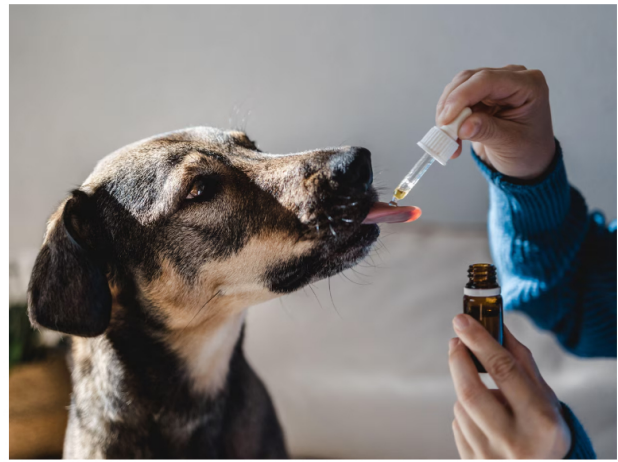
(Which Tanzanian national park is right for you?)

Alexandra Owens is a freelance travel writer based in New York City and Cape Town. Her work focuses on the power and potential of ecotourism, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. She is happiest when surrounded by animals, including her rescue pup, Riona. Follow her adventures on [Instagram](#).



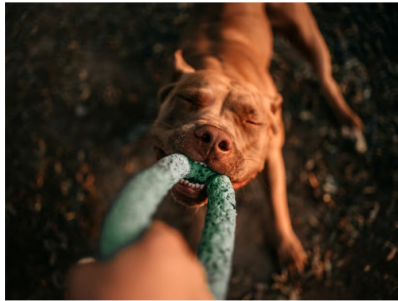
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