



Lion Dog Digest

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Rhodesian Ridgeback International Foundation

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We continue the story of the "Lion Dogs in the Kruger National Park" in this issue of your Digest, this time dealing mainly with the three dogs at the North end, two at Punda Maria and one at Shangoni.

Unfortunately before we deal with that entertaining saga, we must start off with some bad news. It was with great joy that we announced in the last issue that Gypsey's eye had recovered fully. We are very disappointed in having to inform you that she has now lost the use of that eye. Her left eye went distinctly grey over a three-day period after Peter returned from a week's vacation. She'd looked okay on his arrival but the eye suddenly clouded over, and a visit to the vet indicated that she had probably been hit by a Mozambican Spitting Cobra for the third time in her life: there is no hope of recovery on this occasion.

So Gypsey becomes the Park's first casualty which is a great pity so soon after she became the first RR to whelp a registered litter in the Kruger National Park for over fifty years, as far as we know. We must however emphasize that word "registered" as there was an earlier litter which would not be accepted by KUSA due to the dam's HD 1.1 Grading. Of course she could face up to lion, rhino, buffalo, elephant, etc. etc., but those abilities don't count when aiming to breed a dog that can be registered. A Jo'burg breeder, who knows her dogs well enough, maintains that what you see in the show ring wouldn't know what a rabbit was about, they wouldn't know how to hunt or chase something, they wouldn't even survive in the bush. All quite likely, as those features are patently unimportant while we exclude dogs from registration purely and solely on the basis of a hip x-ray. So we are not surprised to hear the sportsmen say they are not interested in taking our champions into the bush, that show dogs are to be avoided at all costs. It all sounds awfully like the age-old arguments about working dogs versus show dogs. Nonetheless we shall continue pushing for our bush dogs to perform adequately in the ring.

Another interesting development regarding dogs in that well known national park concerns the use of two Sitkas at one of the private reserves on the West boundary. Of course we feel that the RR is the only all-round performer suited to that environment. But then we must remember the origin of our favourite breed. We talk glibly about the Mesopotamian Hunting Dog, or the Hottentot Hunting Dog, and really what was it anyway? In more recent years the Sitka has been the most used hunting dog in our country and regardless of how one approaches the matter it must be the logically accepted nearest ancestor of the RR around today. Let us not forget that the Africanis (Sitka) comes with or without a ridge.



Zee



Bulu

From our point of view it may appear to be going backwards in evolution to put the Sitka into conservation areas, but on the other hand it could still prove a lot, and it deserves our whole-hearted support. Maybe our dogs need a re-injection of the Sitka mind: for example, how do they cope with snake and crocodile, probably the greatest threat to our ridgies. We shall try to pick up some good info on these two dogs and carry it in our next LDD.

There have been rumours (unsubstantiated to us) that the authorities have already legitimised dogs being used to hunt. We continue our efforts to establish a Code of Conduct for Hunting Dogs. Ralf Kalwa, Ranger at the KNP, has offered to guide this matter through to finality so if you have any specific points you wish to make, please send them in to the Foundation's Post Box.

We have arranged registration of the Kennel name "Shangoni" for exclusive use i. r. o. litters whelped in the KNP. There will not be all that many breeders in the Reserve, so it should be convenient for them to co-operate on litter registrations. They have a good selection of proven males, and we are now trying to increase the number of good bitches.



Shangoni

Bruce Leslie, Section Ranger, Vlakteplaas, recovered the above signboard from a bygone era. What interest the RAC had in Shangoni we do not really know, in fact we know next to nothing about the name altogether. Let us see what information comes to hand. Another puppy, a bitch, has joined the six RR's already there. She teams up with Zimba, who is featured in this issue's main story.

She is a very determined young lady and refused to be over-awed by the two resident adult dogs. She is expected to be more forward than the incumbent male, and we feel this is a safe move now that adequate experience has been gained with a male who was always expected to be fairly conservative.

So on to the second half of that story about the KNP dogs.

THE LION DOGS OF THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, part two.



Delivering puppies in the KNP has its moments. This elephant was not interested in the laws pertaining to free passage. He started off on the verge of the tar and moved steadily nearer the middle as the car, which was moving more and more off the tar, inched towards him.

We telephonically contacted the other three rangers who are accompanied by their dogs while on duty. The first was Peter who works with Gypsy and Jambo. They are both performing exceedingly well, beyond his most optimistic hopes, but much more easily when separate. Together they form their own little pack, and require much more attention to control. Surprisingly the young male Jambo (on his own) is very easy to control, and he is much more sensitive than Gypsy; he is very mindful of Peter's annoyance. The rains during the last few months have precluded normal patrol work and Jambo has become very attached to and protective of Anelle (Peter's wife) in the home environment, and stays glued to her heels all day long.

Peter Scott is Section Ranger at Punda Maria up in the North. His main responsibility is area integrity, i.e. anti-poaching and snares etc., and also all those other demands placed on all Section Rangers in the Park i.e. Law Enforcement, Code of Conduct, Observation Interpretation and Monitoring of Natural and Unnatural Phenomena, Alien Organisms and Pollution Control, Erosion, Fire Management, Water Provision, Population Control, Regulating Resource Usage, Rehabilitation of Natural or Unnatural Disturbed Areas, Infrastructure Development and Maintenance, EIA, Problem Animal Control, Neighbouring Community Liaison, Admin Personnel and Financial Management, Training, Internal/External Government Department Liaison, and Protection of Personnel.

Gypsy showed her capabilities from a very early age. Peter had been requested not to over-exercise her until at least six months of age. She had just turned seven months when he had an opportunity to take her on an extensive bush walk. After 3-4 hours walking through the bush she did the routine RR thing and refused to move on into what lay ahead. It was another case of "with so many places to go in the Park this one is a very bad choice". Failing to get her to move in spite of strong encouragement he decided to turn right and "avoid" the danger. She kept looking over her shoulder and it was a fairly easy matter to walk around on a gentle curve at a radius of approximately 300m from the point that interested her so. It did not take long to get to the far side of the bushy area they had circled and there, very obvious now in the clearing, was a pride of several lions. She could not have seen them, theory has it that she would not have smelt them so one presumes she heard them. With the hearing of dogs estimated to be seven times as sensitive as our own, it is always difficult to determine whether they in fact hear sounds way beyond our capacity or not. The indisputable fact of the matter was that this puppy was very aware of their presence. Peter knew that there were lions in the area but he had no knowledge of their specific location. Not only did Gypsy locate them, but she made her feelings very well known, and she did not utter a sound. For one so young her accuracy was astounding.

Visitors to the KNP, in addition to the Park staff, often come upon Peter and his dogs. They are fascinated to meet up with them out in the open and all are very fond of Gypsy in particular. The exciting news about her is

that the left eye has recovered completely from the severe damage caused by Mozambican Spitting Cobra. (Note: This was written prior to her third exposure to the dangerous venom.) Several months after the incident it looked as though she would lose the use of it, even if only partially. An unexplained, fantastic, recovery. Apart from the eye problem both his dogs enjoy excellent health. As with the visitors, Anelle and Peter think their two RR's are very beautiful, and the latter admits he spoils them rotten. Maybe, but Peter has an odd way of doing so, as I heard from a hunter who has no connection with the Park whatsoever who maintains that Peter took his dog along to Church one day. This story is obviously a rumour and is denied vehemently by Peter, but it gives an indication of the perception people have of him well beyond the Park's borders.



Gypsy



Jambo

Jaco, down in the South end of the Park, has developed a great feeling of trust in his Juba: he feels so confident in him that he would be comfortable on patrol in the Park even without his rifle. Juba is not used on official business, but accompanies Jaco on walks four or five times a week. He has proved to be totally effective, running at a fair distance, always wanting to chase/run with impala. Jaco has consistently allowed him to operate at a greater distance than the other rangers do, hiding away whenever Juba ventures too far, forcing him to return as soon as visible contact is lost. Juba can be very excited when he hasn't been for a walk for a few days and it takes a few minutes to settle him down. If there are lion in the area, or if he is in a new area, he immediately comes to heel, and it is only when he has experience of the area and knows that there is nothing dangerous about that he increases his range to 30 – 40 m.

It seems that he finds the Impala to be fun play-mates. He used to run up to rhino, buffalo, giraffe, and elephant, but as they ignore him he doesn't bother them any more. As soon as he detects lion, leopard, hyena he is back at heel and Jaco gets the message as to what is on the go, and this remains true even if the walk has just commenced.

Jaco operates only along "no entry" roads so he does not come into contact with the public: he gives his dog lots of latitude, much more than anyone else, and this also confirms a very interesting point. He has proved that there is a symbiotic relationship between dog and wild animals whereby they remain totally at ease with each other, and taking a RR on a walk through the KNP with a bunch of visitors will not be at all adversely affected by the presence of a dog like Juba even if he is operating 20m and more from heel.

Juba was excluded from big river experience until almost 2 years of age, and his first exposure included the very close sighting of a large crocodile. He now approaches all deep and broad water with extreme caution and studies it carefully before venturing further. All deep water within his area is likely to be occupied by crocodile and it looks as though he makes this assumption or he is aware of their presence: this is a very welcome development as crocodile represent a very deadly threat to all RR's. On the other hand he splashes through shallow pools and rivers with no fear whatsoever.



Juba

Juba is making a very big contribution to testing out further uses for the dogs there. The basic use of RR's in the KNP is to provide advance warning of nearby hazards. They are extremely reliable in carrying out this task and it puts the handler in a more confident frame of mind when on the trail or attending to various duties, e.g. water provision. When you are fixing that damaged water supply you can all too easily give your total attention to the matter in hand and overlook the arrival of nasties on the side. Therefore you want the dog to tell you of their arrival so that you can decide upon what action to take (if any), and that dog must not then leave your side; also it is not practical to restrain him on a lead.

Juba moves out well beyond his handler's immediate ring of protection, and he does it in a perfectly secure fashion. He operates in a fairly wide arc around Jaco and does not go very close up to the animals, except Impala. He does nevertheless check out the presence of everything around, and if he comes upon anything potentially harmful he conveys his fears very quickly and carefully to his handler. And he can do this without disturbing the animals in any way whatsoever.

The last dog to be considered is Zimba who is used by Bruce Leslie. He has developed his own very long stride in a loping type of movement, which allows him to attain a very good speed while maintaining his gait at a walk; it is a bit ungainly and the transition to a trot is pretty ugly. However, it works for him and it probably permits greater sustained unstressed endurance which is good as he is no lightweight. His other great claim to fame is his ability to follow a blood spoor: he was given his first chance at seven months and he took it totally successfully, first time around. He also has potentially the most exciting prospects of all, Bruce deals with problem lion in the north-west of the Park, both out as well as inside it. The circumstances determine what action must be taken, and darting/tranquillising is the preferred route. I have personal experience of this dog's "limitations". We went out looking for lion and buffalo to obtain video shots of the dog in relatively close proximity. As luck would have it we were dropped off right next to fresh lion spoor (say 6 hours old) and Zimba followed it to a nearby bush where the lion had rubbed up against the branches. He took a long deep sniff of the branches, the hairs rose at the back of his neck, and he didn't relax until the walk was finished four hours later.



Zimba

Now, we wanted the dog to move ahead by at least twenty meters, but he was exceedingly reluctant. His preferred position was between Bruce and myself. This diminished the advantage Zimba was supposed to give us which was obviously to provide advance warning of the powerful beasts out there. With lots of coaxing he did venture forth every now and then but certainly not as routinely as we would have wished.

He did detect the remnants of a kill under a tree which consisted of a pile of hair and the two small horns attached to a small bit of skull, which was very skilful of him. He also brought us to a standstill on another occasion, became very agitated, looking here and looking there. However he couldn't give us a direction so we gave up on him and proceeded. We had barely covered five meters when there was an incredible crashing sound dead ahead at 20 – 30 meters as what could only have been a buffalo went looking for quieter pastures. There was no possible way in which we could have detected that big fellow; we enjoyed no sight of him at all in the very dense bush. In his own inexperienced manner, Zimba had in fact done the job to the best of his ability. He had told us that there was something around, even if he didn't know exactly where. Bruce had been forewarned and had taken adequate precaution and, yes, Zimba had indeed moved forward willingly with us as soon as we moved on again.

However, he must get his direction fixing technique sorted out and he must be prepared to move forward freely ahead of us, not glued to our heels. This is not altogether his fault. The whole intention when placing the first dogs in the Park was to provide examples which would be particularly passive in approach: they are not supposed to go charging out into the open with gusto and bravado, so he really is behaving as was intended. However, experience has been gained and we can now afford to step up the challenge and Oscar, (with Ralf down at the South end of the Park) was the first to be of the more adventuresome type. We have now followed up with another, equally forward type, for Bruce, this time in the form of a bitch. She is determined and adventuresome and theory has it that she will move ahead and Zimba will have no option but to join her up front and protect her. Once he has hold of the idea then perhaps he will be bolder and she can be withdrawn and used only on her own: we are still wary of working these dogs in pack form and need a bit more practice/experience.



Zimba and Claudia

The upshot of all this is that the seventh member of the RR community in the KNP has arrived and we have the making of a workable breeding group where a bit of mixing and matching can take place, hopefully producing dogs that will meet the direct demands of the people who work them. That means we still intend breeding dogs custom-made for the job: we see no object in having to train them to fit the bill while we can still breed the character/temperament required for their work. In this regard you may feel that the limited demands on the dog make for very simple selection. Please remember that the learning curve can be pretty short for the owner as well as the dog and that way-out experimentation does not represent an acceptable option. There is no convenient doggy training school around the corner for the benefit of animal or human.

THE E-COLLAR

It was decided to try using an E-Collar on one of the KNP dogs due to the serious nature of the possible consequences should he repeat his mistake. The objective was to stop Oscar breaking away when allowed out of the gate and rushing over to the bakkie parked 50m away. A leopard routinely crosses this open patch, apart from the possibility of any manner of other game, and there was the requirement of total control at all times. On the lead he was fine, but his exuberance and general excitement about getting out and about was just too much. In essence this was just a 'heel' exercise but it was being done when Oscar was subject to maximum challenge. One feels that with more patience one will win with him, but how many mistakes will the bush forgive (he does not have 9 lives) and without Ralf for protection his life expectancy is rated at 30 mins max.

For better or for worse the experiment was undertaken. On reflection it is felt that the decision was definitely correct. The baboon episode was very much on their minds and Oscar was far too valuable a dog to let the risks mount up. So the explanatory video tape was watched with great interest and the leaflets were read very carefully. The collar was put on the lowest setting possible (found to be quite sufficient). Oscar was allowed to run around with it on to get used to the idea, i.e. not to associate it with the technique. It is very effective. You may have to use it two, maybe three times for the first lesson. After that you probably will manage with one reminder. It's a "quick-fix" solution and it works. It does not to any extent reduce the basic training and therefore is not strictly speaking a training method; it merely enhances your authority, it backs up and strengthens your voice or signalled command. Ralf feels it is just another tool with very limited applicability. When used at close range you are merely over-riding the dog's inclination to over-ride your instruction. The RR is a very powerful, headstrong animal and in its youth it likes to make its own decisions, even when well bonded and a fully-fledged unit in the team.

Oscar also jumped off the rear of the bakkie before the flap was down. Dropping the flap is a signal. It's like the hunter firing his shot: when the rifle fires the RR must come on to full alert - until then he is only on half alert, using his senses to detect unwarranted nasties nearby. But when that shot goes off, he must be ready to deal with a wounded animal, whether it attacks or runs off (to be tracked). Similarly when Ralf drops the flap at the back of the bakkie, and not before, the dogs drop the passive role adopted on the bakkie which causes them to show total disinterest in the passing panoply of animals. Now they are at full alert and they must respond to whatever danger is nearby communicating their views rapidly to their handler so that he can take whatever remedial action is required to protect all of them. So far Ralf has not resorted to the use of his rifle, but it is always there should all else fail.

Just like the rifle is a tool of last resort so it goes with the E Collar. Each dog has his own little ways of doing things and the training curve is one of attention, attention, attention. The collar teaches him nothing, it is merely a strong reprimand. If he doesn't know what he should be doing in the first place that thing on his neck will make him even worse.

As a result of the experience with Oscar the collar was also used on Gypsey for the same misdemeanor, that of jumping off the back of the bakkie before being commanded to do so. She'd been guilty thrice, the collar treatment has been applied twice, and she has been a very good girl ever since. However, though successful, Peter also remains not skeptical but hesitant regarding efficacy. He will get what he wants from her in time, but

will it be prior to disaster: as far as he is concerned these dogs are just too clever, they don't need E-collars. He only used it on the bitch and so far it looks most unlikely that it would be needed on the dog. On the first occasion its use on the bitch caused her to stop dead in her tracks (which was the intention) and look around in a startled fashion. On the other occasion it did get her to jump ever so slightly, but again it managed to stop her and brought her back under control. (Note: As to efficacy, we do not have enough experience in operating the unit: it remains possible that the setting used is far too low).

The tone control was not used prior to "stimulation" as all training and operations with the dogs are at short range. There is no circumstance they can think of where the collar would be used at 100m or more, but the long range possibilities were put to Ralf all the same. Up in Kariba, Hans uses a long range collar for his dogs which operate as a pack, usually three strong. Each dog has been trained with the collar at one stage or another, including use of the tone, and as Hans says, he can't stand using the stimulation but he does not know how he would get by without it. He tests the strength of stimulation on his upper arm so that he knows just what the dog is getting regardless of whatever setting it happens to indicate. He then puts a collar only on the bitch and lets the three of them operate freely on his fairly extensive property. As you can imagine the pack moves out into the bush at speed and in no time at all they are operating at least 1000m out. Usually he can maintain visual contact so he has a pretty good idea of what they are up to out there, but nonetheless he has little control over what it consists of. So when he becomes apprehensive he pushes the tone control, and as they operate in relatively close formation, the other two can hear it equally as well as the bitch who is actually wearing the collar. They all swing around as one and rush back unerringly to wherever Hans is, his location all the time being known to them as is the case with all good bush dogs.

We return to Ralf and his dogs. He shall shortly be using them on tracking problem animals. The reasons as to why they have a problem are limitless, but usually through fighting, mishap and predators. Whatever the cause their condition poses a threat not just to themselves but potentially to every visitor that enters the Park. They must therefore be dealt with one way or the other and this means tracking them down. Dogs are not the only method but they are indispensable when it comes to telling you that the injured buffalo is only 30 m away and you therefore have enough time to use that dart gun (and /or the rifle too if things turn nasty). This operation necessitates training at increased range and Oscar is the likely candidate. There is no nice little training school around the corner for the purpose and most of Oscar's learning will take place in real circumstances. He should be up to it but will he take chances? Ralf has laboured many hours with the very powerful young fellow and cannot face losing him because he will not heel immediately at the appropriate moment.

Outside the Park one of the areas where E collars are thought of automatically is that concerning attacks on sheep. Farmers do not like their flocks being wiped out and one RR can cause frightful damage in a matter of minutes. Usually correction necessitates trying to break the dog of its fun-game at a significant distance and that is why the E-collar comes to mind. Whereas at the KNP, and up at Kariba, the desire is to get the dogs to heel, the intention at the sheep farm is to stop the dog in its tracks when he has killing on his mind. The instinct to hunt was originally part of every hound and in the case of the RR that instinct is still pretty strong and close to the surface. Anything that kills the farmer's herds and flocks is vermin, and vermin is usually shot out of existence on sight. Those who have used an E-collar remain squeamish about it, but a few point out that the human is too softhearted (they themselves included), that they detected no long term adverse side effects in those dogs, and that they (the dogs) seemed to cope better with the treatment than the sensitive human.

When the leader of the pack of RR's enforces his subjugation on another pack member, he/she does it in a form which causes damage we could not possibly bear to inflict. Anyone who has separated two real RR males when fighting can testify to the fearful wounds that result; possibly he bears some scars himself. Having taken mains 220v jolts several times in my life, having carelessly sampled motor bike (at 5000rpm) and aircraft magneto discharges, and having absorbed a distant lightning strike (the side effects lasted more than a week), at least I've suffered significant practical exposure. I still can not say I'm looking forward to using an E-collar should this need ever arise. So you must understand why we are somewhat circumspect when making this tool available.