

## A Rare Sighting of Asian Wild Dog *Cuon alpinus* Feeding in Khao Yai National Park

On 21 April 1997, whilst sitting alone in the Nong Pakchi watch tower at Khao Yai National Park, FL was fortunate to see a pack of Asian Wild Dogs *Cuon alpinus* during mid-to late afternoon. During this time the weather was good, mostly with sunshine, and the very short growth of grass in the clearing provided excellent observation conditions. Initially, a single individual was observed, through a 30x high resolution telescope, casually walking into the back of the clearing at approximately 1500 h and perhaps 350 m from the watch tower. The animal was stopping occasionally and scanning its surroundings. Very shortly afterwards another animal appeared, using the same path, and both animals wandered around the back of the clearing, not far from the forest edge.

After about five minutes yet another animal appeared, followed by another, all of which followed exactly the same route into the clearing from a small trail within grasses and bushes that extended out towards the forest. These animals spent perhaps ten minutes moving around in the clearing before a final group of dogs appeared: these were a further four adults and a tight group of pups—13 in all—which were strung out over a very short distance and casually walking in a straight line. Most of the dogs had by this time congregated in the area at the forest edge in the southwest corner of the clearing. Most adults were sitting or lounging about whilst the pups were playing in a fairly tight-knit group at the forest edge. Several adult dogs moved off along the forest edge towards the watchtower.

All of a sudden, and with no warning, an adult female Sambar Deer ran out of the forest, or perhaps from the forest edge where it had somehow been disturbed by the dogs. Within seconds there were two dogs very close on its trail and another four following some 15–30 m behind. The deer ran across the clearing, towards the area lying just behind the large permanent pond near the forest edge. It seemed that the deer would surely escape since it could easily outrun the dogs in the short grass, but the animal chose to head straight into the pond rather than out of the clearing. The dogs, only seconds behind, immediately followed it into the water, even though it was deep enough that they all had to swim. The deer too, had some difficulty because the water was well over its upper legs and reached its shoulder in some parts of the pool. Not all the dogs followed the deer initially, however, and three remained on the water's edge, rushing around the pool to the other side where they successfully deterred the deer from leaving on several occasions during the first minute or so in the water. At first the deer was able to keep the dogs at bay, largely by intimidation rather than action, but within a few minutes the dogs became braver and started to take bites at the deer, concentrating on its head and hind-quarters.

In about 5 minutes, four dogs had managed to grab and hold parts of the deer's head and another sank its jaws into its side, at which point the deer keeled over in the water, apparently dead from fright or exhausted. The dogs clung onto the carcass and dragged it to the edge, where they quickly began to eat the animal. Unfortunately, the carcass was mostly out of view from the watchtower at this time. Up to six dogs fed at the carcass

for perhaps 20 minutes. At this time, a helicopter buzzed the clearing, circling the pool on several occasions: at first the dogs ignored this, but after the third period of disturbance, most of them ran off to the area in which the pups had last been observed. Some 5 minutes after the helicopter had left the adults re-emerged with the pups and all moved towards the carcass. Eleven pups were in one main group accompanied by two adults; one of these adults, however, left the group to search for the missing cubs and returned with two that had to be ushered in the right direction. Although not seen, the pups were in the vicinity of the carcass and were presumably feeding themselves.

The entire group stayed in the vicinity of the carcass for something like 90–120 minutes, with individuals occasionally feeding at the carcass, some animals resting and others wandering about. During this time, a herd of Sambar that had been in the area prior to the chase, reappeared and were nervously feeding nearby. One adult male Sambar was even observed within metres of the dogs. Several times, an adult dog approached this Sambar closely and was warned off, clearly frightened, by rapid turning and lowering of the head of the Sambar.

FL left the area at this time but MG appeared and continued observations. He counted 13 pups and 8 adult dogs. MG made similar observations to FL, with the pups generally and strictly moving in a long line with the females nosing about in the short grass nearby. At fairly short intervals the pups would lie down and rest for a few minutes before continuing their progress towards the forest edge. And at no time were the females more than 10–15m from the pups. It seems that the pups consisted of three or four litters since there were four adult female dogs carefully shepherding the large group of young. Neither observer saw signs of aggression between members of the group, or heard any vocalizations, though at such a distance these might go unheard.

Whilst MG was making observations, a group of 11 Sambar deer (a mixture of adult females, young males and two very young calves) were grazing some 150–200 m from the dogs with one adult female Sambar keeping a close watch on their activities. On the eastern side of the grassland, another group of five adult Sambar started to move towards the water, but about 100 m from the pond, one adult male gave an alarm call and the group returned, on the trot, from where they had come and disappeared into the forest. Eventually, close to darkness, at around 1840 h, the main group of pups and female dogs disappeared into the forest, shortly afterwards followed by the males. The group of 11 Sambar had by this time moved closer to the water and seemed unconcerned. The following morning, the dogs were observed on or close to the kill, but by afternoon, only two adults were seen.

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