



Enthusiastic canines are on the trail of poachers

Doggone!

The working-dog heritage of Weimaraners and good temperament make the breed well suited for anti-poaching assignments

Off the beaten track, in the private game reserves that border the Kruger National Park, a new animal can be found, streaking through the long grass, still and silent, nose down on a scent: dogs.

These are not wild dogs – this is *Canis lupus familiaris*, the domestic dog, here to do the kind of job for which the dog was originally tamed upwards of 30,000 years ago. The dogs roaming the game reserves are trained to track down wounded game, poached animals and, of course, poachers.

These are working dogs, and it's clear from the expressions on their faces that they love their jobs. They leap into the game vehicle that ferries them about with enthusiasm, their ears pricked and eyes keen; and with youth on their side, they return from a long day of physical work, still panting happily and eager to play.

The oldest of the group of dogs used by K9 Conservation is Landa, a large Weimaraner who is a little over two and a half years old. Manzi, the second Weimaraner, is a year younger; Assegai, a Belgian Malinois, is just over two, while the other Malinois, Makulu, is heading for his first birthday, and promises to be a huge boy in his prime. Vixen, a German Shepherd,



is nearly two, but it's the pitch-black Shepherd, Anubis, named after the Egyptian jackal-headed god, who looks like he's becoming the biggest dog in the bunch, given his size at just six months.

Anubis has got a lot of training to do to catch up with the older dogs, but his working-dog heritage means he'll be a quick learner. All these dogs were chosen because the desire to work is imprinted in the genes of their breeds: German Shepherds were bred to guard flocks, and have long been used for protection, detection, and search and rescue, as are the Malinois (known also as Belgian Shepherds). These dogs are also often used to track and apprehend suspects. The Weimaraner, with



his velvety grey coat, is sometimes called the 'grey ghost', and was bred for use by the aristocracy when hunting big game (boars, bears and deer) in the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, in what is now Germany. Interestingly, the Weimaraner has slightly webbed toes, and is very comfortable in water.

One of the handlers with Makulu, Conraad with Landa and Catharine with Anubis and Manzi

Tiger, tiger

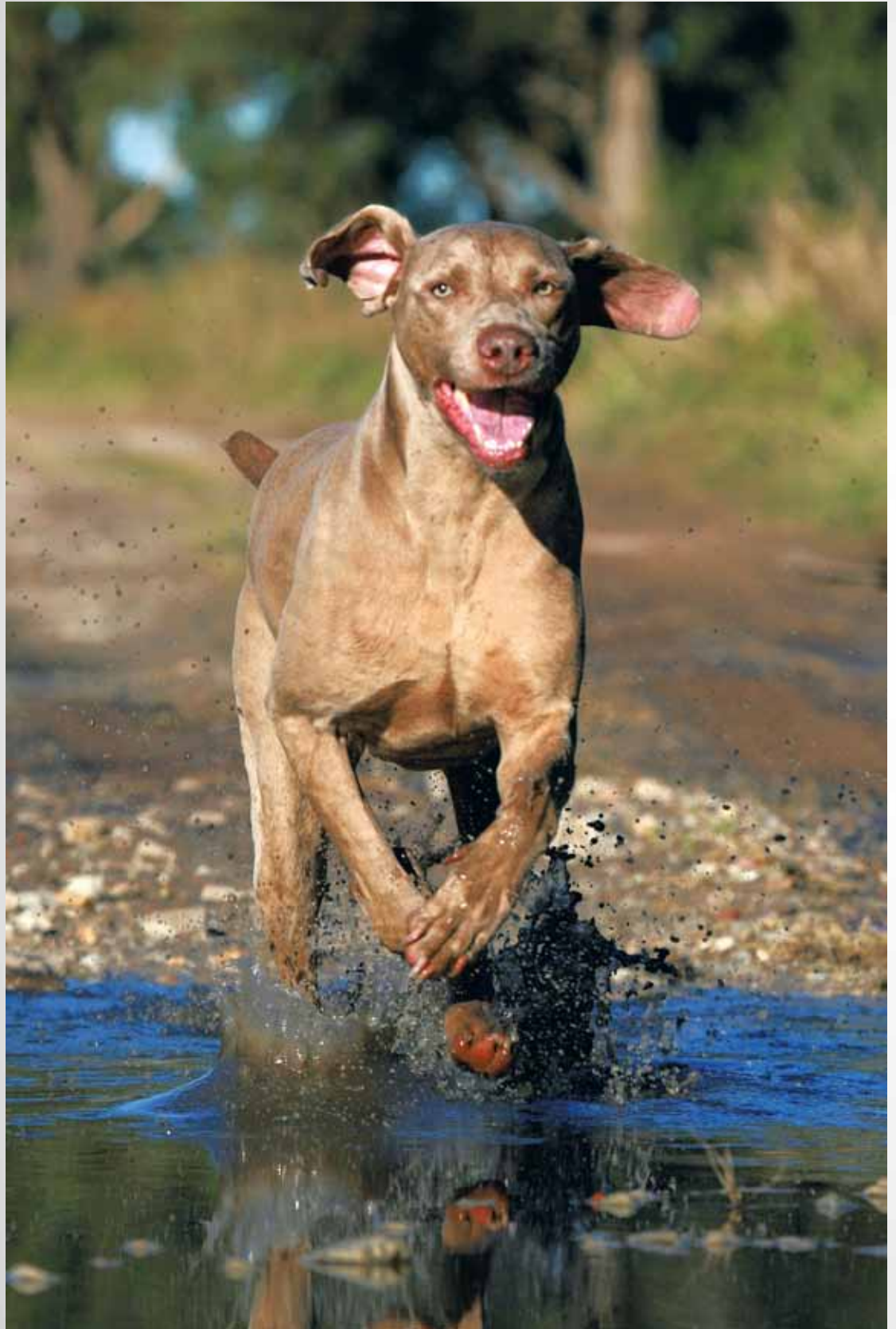
Conraad de Rosner has worked with Weimaraners for nine years. De Rosner is a member of the Game Rangers Association and has been working as a ranger, as well as in game management and game capture, for about 20 years. At the same time, he has extensive experience in anti-poaching work.

His first Weimaraner, with whom he worked for more than six years, was called Zingela, a powerful super-intelligent male who made a brief appearance on the front pages of the newspapers in 2012. Zingela was trained to follow scents and to obey specific commands, such as 'search leopard', so when the tiger Panjo escaped from the back of Goosey Fernandes' bakkie, it was a natural idea to call in De Rosner and Zingela. And sure enough, it took the dog exactly one hour to locate the tiger. After quartering a wide area, Zingela pointed in the direction of the big cat. De Rosner says that when the owner was followed by a crowd of media it spooked poor Panjo, and Zingela had to put his nose down once more to find the frightened cat who had bolted into the long grass.

But this was, as De Rosner says, perhaps Zingela's least important achievement: he had, with De Rosner, notched up a number of arrests of poachers, thieves and other criminals, and in so doing, made a significant contribution to conservation.

Zingela sadly died when he was hit by a vehicle, but De

*Even after a hard day's
work, the dogs still
have enough energy to
play with their handlers*





Rosner went on to create a company, K9 Conservation, aimed at using the incredible abilities of dogs like Zingela to fight the scourge of poaching (www.K9Conservation.co.za). At a time when animals in game reserves are under increasing threat – not least of which is the threat of rhino poaching – it makes sense to utilise the agility, strength, obedience and powerful scenting abilities of dogs to protect the wild game in our reserves. De Rosner is managing director of K9 Conservation and works closely with his partner, Catharine Corrett, who has relocated from Britain to work as operations manager.

A hard day's work

The dogs are paired with a group of dedicated dog handlers who have learnt to train their dogs using praise and reward, a method that clearly works well. They are trained to find bullets at a poaching scene, to track the poachers back from the scene of a crime to where they came from, and to follow the scent of animal parts (because while rhino poaching is a major focus, poaching for bush-meat and muti is also a big concern).

Poachers apparently often use the bull-bars on their vehicles to knock game over, and the dogs pick up the scent on the vehicle from far away, telling their handlers through their body language that they're onto something. The dog handlers are then able to track the vehicle and when the person's premises are searched, invariably animals or body parts are found. The dogs will also pick up the scent along the perimeter fence where game has been pulled under the fence and it can then be tracked to the poacher's home. And they are able to lead the handlers to find animals that have been wounded by poachers; often a veterinarian is then

brought in and the animal can be treated and saved.

Corrett is paired with a dog, too, but she goes out on conservation initiatives, helping scientists and conservationists track game, for example, or following darted animals.

"Our teams are out on observation all day, every day," says De Rosner. Their constant presence in an area soon becomes known to the local poachers. "Our mandate is to protect the rhino, so if we find a large group together, we'll stay with them." But while they are out, the dog handlers are constantly training their dogs as well. A dog's day of duty is eight hours long, but, De Rosner points out, that includes an hour of grooming and some time just playing and blowing off steam after returning to base.

The dogs also go out on regular night patrol, as that's when poachers are often active – young Anubis is likely to be especially useful at night when he's fully trained. With his black coat, in the dark he simply melts away. They run free in the bush, because there's a hazard to being on a leash: if you run into a dangerous situation, both dog and handler are hampered.

The bond between dog and handler is clearly very tight, and these dogs are not treated like property, but more like a family member. They sleep indoors at night due to the risk posed by the local predators, and the young company is able to feed them densely nutritious food which fuels them for their physically demanding jobs. And once off duty, nothing's more fun than racing after a plastic bottle or a ball thrown by your handler.

Conraad de Rosner with Landa

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