

# CONGO HOUNDS

## THE BLOODHOUNDS OF VIRUNGA NATIONAL PARK

By Dr. Marlene Zahner

Photos by Ethan Baron



**B**ack in December 2010, Dr. Marlene Zahner was going about her business when she received a most unexpected call from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Zahner, a Swiss large animal veterinarian and avid horse and dog trainer, found herself talking to Emmanuel de Merode, the Chief Warden of Virunga National Park. De Merode was seeking Zahner's help with putting together a canine anti-poaching unit in Virunga National Park to help protect its wildlife, most notably the over 200 critically endangered mountain gorillas that call the park home. De Merode explained that Virunga mountain

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Die Umweltstiftung „Fondation Yves Rocher“ hat den Umweltpreis „Trophée de Femmes“ 2013 an drei Schweizerinnen verliehen. Sie wurden für ihr außergewöhnliches Engagement im Umwelt- und Naturschutz geehrt. Insgesamt erhielten die Preisträgerinnen Preisgelder in Höhe von 10.000 € (ca. 12.000 SFR).

Hier stellen wir Ihnen die schweizerischen Preisträgerinnen des Jahres 2013 vor:

**1. Preis: 5.000 € (ca. 6.100 SFR)  
für Marlene Zahner, Widen (Kt. Aargau)**

**„Kampf gegen Wilderei und Schutz bedrohter Arten  
im Virunga Nationalpark im Kongo, Afrika“**

Das Engagement von Marlene Zahner gilt dem Schutz des tropischen Virunga Nationalparks und der dort lebenden, vom Aussterben bedrohten Tiere. Die Tierwelt hat sich seit 2010 dem Kampf gegen die Wilderei in einem der ältesten Nationalparks weltweit verschrieben. In den letzten Jahren wurde dieser atemberaubende Wilderndelict um bis zu 90% durch Wilderei dramatisch zurückgegangen. Marlene Zahner trägt dazu bei, indem sie die Hunde der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft aus, die gemeinsam mit kongolesischen Wilderern aufgeben und deren Fellen, die bedrohte Tiere wandern oder sogar töten, zurückholen.

Dr. Marlene Zahner won the first place prize on a national level from the Yves Rocher Foundation for the Conservation of Nature for her work with the Congo hounds!! Next step will be the international prize in Paris.



gorillas were being maimed and killed by poachers' snares, and that animals elsewhere in the park were being killed at an alarming rate. Simply put, Virunga's rangers needed help tracking the poachers that were destroying Africa's oldest and most biologically diverse national park.

For Dr. Zahner, whose passion in life is working with animals and teaching others to give them the respect they deserve, this was a chance of a lifetime. Over the next two months, Zahner called her Bloodhound contacts around the world and enlisted their help with finding five Bloodhound puppies that had the necessary working pedigree and would be old enough to leave their respective litters in a few months' time. In parallel, Zahner sent detailed plans to Virunga that laid out everything the dogs would need when they arrived. By March 2011, Zahner and five Bloodhound puppies, ranging from twelve weeks to six months old, were on an airplane headed for the Congo. Aside from some serious visa hassles at the Congo border – and a somewhat tense late night trip to park headquarters through territory only deemed safe during the day – Zahner, the Bloodhounds, and her armed ranger escort arrived at park headquarters in Rumangabo without incident.

In the days that followed, Zahner spent every waking hour with the puppies, making sure their compound was free of





hazards and that the dogs were getting all the nourishment and care they needed to recover from the journey to Virunga. She knew full well that the stress of being plucked from their litters was difficult enough, let alone the stress of being crated and flown halfway across the world. Each of the puppies did remarkably well and immediately took to their new home. The Congolese working at park headquarters were actually the ones struggling to adjust. Most had never spent time around dogs before and were quite scared of them, especially Dodie and Lily, the two six-month old “puppies” that already weighed 80 pounds apiece. The same could be said of the resident baboons that feared the new arrivals were coming to take over.

With the Bloodhounds settled in and all their basic needs covered, Zahner set to work finding ranger candidates

for Bloodhound “handlers.” The main requirement was to be able to demonstrate a natural affinity for the Bloodhounds. In this instance, the dogs would be the main judges. Zahner knew from years of teaching man trailing in Europe that working with people that do not relate well to animals is an uphill battle. Ranger Christian Shamavu was the first to catch Zahner’s eye. He could not contain his smile while working with the dogs and one could easily tell that each and every dog loved him. Ranger Shamavu was clearly an animal lover and had the necessary ranger skills for the job, so Zahner wisely made him the head of the new canine unit. Over the following months, Zahner and Ranger Shamavu solidified their team of rangers and began regular training – Zahner becoming a regular commuter between Switzerland and the Congo. On each sub-

sequent trip, Zahner would bring along volunteer experts in the field of man trailing to help her train the teams. Experts from Switzerland and from the German police have accompanied Zahner on nearly all of her training trips (six 2-week trips in the first year alone).

At the six-month mark, each ranger and his Bloodhound were able to successfully use a scent article to track a fellow ranger in a game of hide and seek. With each successive training exercise, tasks were made more difficult. During this time, Ranger Gracien Sivanza also showed a natural aptitude for working with the Bloodhounds, as well as a high level of dedication and professionalism. Although Zahner expected that it would be over a year before any of the teams were ready to begin deployments, Virunga’s Bloodhound teams were ready inside of eight months.



Their first mission was to track a group of elephant poachers in the center of the park. Like other parks in Africa, Virunga is struggling to protect its herds from ivory poachers. Rangers stationed in the area led Ranger Shamavu and his Bloodhound Dodie to the carcass of the elephant that had literally been beheaded for its tusks. Both handler and dog were understandably shaken by the gruesome sight and smell of the elephant's decaying body, but they quickly zeroed in on the scent of the poachers and began to track them. Before long, they found themselves coming up on a small village where the poachers were now believed to have fled. Just before making contact, Ranger Shamavu and Dodie turned the mission over to the rangers they were assisting.

As with all deployments, the goal of the job is twofold: first and foremost, protect the canine team, and second, catch the bad guys. Sadly, only a few months passed before the canine team was summoned back to the center of the park for yet another elephant poaching, this time

near Lake Edward. As before, the canine team quickly picked up the scent. After following the scent trail for 10 km (6.2 miles), the team found themselves just outside a rebel camp. Their job done, the canine team gladly turned the rest of the mission over to their fellow rangers.

In October 2012, Rangers Shamavu and Sivanza flew back to Europe with Dr. Zahner for a fundraising tour in Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. While in there, the rangers also had the chance to visit and train with their new European law enforcement friends, and see sights from the Swiss Alps to Florence, Italy. From the rangers' perspective, "It was a trip of a lifetime." Unfortunately, not long after they arrived back in the Congo, war exploded again. The rangers have had to put their families in refugee camps to protect them and their daily work in Virunga is now punctuated with increased uncertainty and peril. Until the situation improves, there is little chance the canine unit will be able to patrol the Mikeno mountain gorilla sector. Deploy-

ments in the center of the park will continue as long as the safety of the teams can be assured. Such are the realities on the frontlines of conservation.

If you would like to support their work, please visit: [www.gorilla.cd](http://www.gorilla.cd). ■

