



CSI BLOODHOUNDS

Dodi, Sabrina, Lila, Stella and Lilly may seem like strange names for wildlife rangers. And indeed, unusual rangers they are, for it's not their sharp eyesight or keen hearing that qualify them for the task, but their outstanding ability to sniff out a trail. Dodi and her pals are bloodhounds that were imported as pups in 2011 to perform a unique function in Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo. **Sara Evans** follows their progress.

TEXT BY SARA EVANS

Two years on, the young bloodhounds are part of an elite ranger and canine unit known as Congohounds, tasked to help protect Virunga's wild animals against the heavily armed poachers whose presence makes this one of the world's most dangerous national parks. The initiative is the first of its kind in Central Africa.

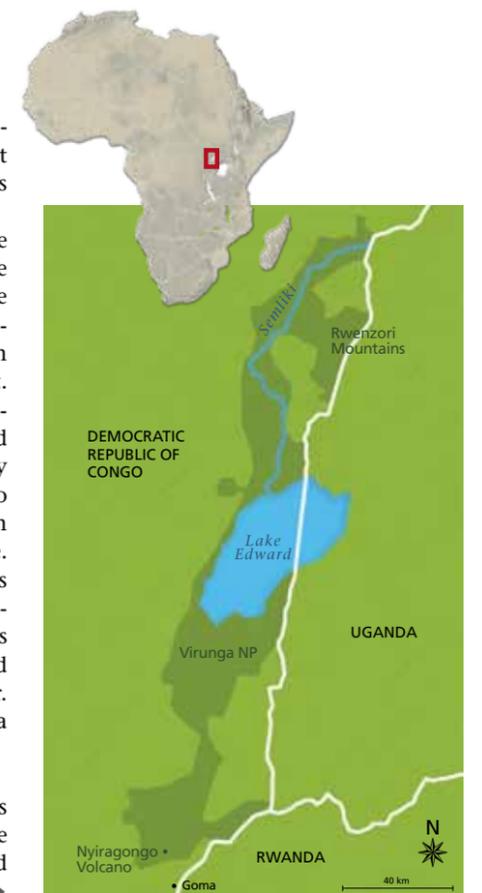
Virunga National Park, on the eastern border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), is a UNESCO World Heritage Site covering more than 7 800 square kilometres. Its varied habitats support lions, buffaloes, hippos and elephants and, uniquely among national parks everywhere, three great ape species – chimpanzees, eastern lowland gorillas and around 200 of the world's 800 or so Critically Endangered mountain gorillas.

Over the past two decades, the poaching of nearly all these animals has increased dramatically. The effect on the park's wildlife has been devastating, especially for hippos and elephants, whose numbers have been decimated. Of the original 29 000 hippos only

1 200 remain, and fewer than 400 elephants survive from the magnificent herds that once numbered 3 000-plus individuals.

It's not just the wildlife that the poachers turn their weapons on; the rangers are targets too. Since 1996, more than 130 rangers have been killed protecting the animals that live within Virunga and those that pass through it. Others have been kidnapped and mutilated. Although the rangers were armed and had received military training, they clearly required further support to defend the wildlife and to track down the poachers and bring them to justice. It was decided that adding trained dogs to anti-poaching units could significantly reduce the number of wild animals killed and help locate critically injured rangers. Bloodhounds were the answer. And so came Dodi, Sabrina, Lila, Stella and Lilly.

Accompanying the canines was veterinarian Marlene Zähler, one of the world's top bloodhound trainers. Supported by German ▶





MARLENE ZÄHNER

volunteers Ursula and Marcel Maierhofer, both crime scene investigation detectives, and police officer Swen Busch, Zähler had started training the Congohounds in May 2011. They simulated criminal and poaching incidents where techniques for photographing and preserving the scene and securing and handling an item with the poacher's smell on it (called a 'scent article') were necessary.

Scent articles stimulate the bloodhound's amazing sense of smell. Once the dog has fixed the scent, it can isolate it – even if it is 300 hours old – from millions and follow it over very long

distances for several days at a time. The process is called 'man-trailing'.

On arrival in Virunga, Zähler and the dogs were faced with its numerous habitats, so tracking scenarios were recreated in villages, savanna areas, swamps, rainforests and mountains, and on water. Building in intensity, these ongoing sessions develop the unit's skills further, as Congohounds handler David Nezehose explained. 'The training exercises are always adapted to [suit the skills of] the team,' he said. 'We also change the scent article and the scenario to make sure that everyone is being challenged, including the ranger whose



LUANN CADG

Virunga National Park

Dominated by a chain of active volcanoes, Virunga National Park's habitats comprise lakes, marshland, savanna, afro-alpine vegetation, lava plains, permanent glaciers and snow, and low-altitude and afro-montane forest belts. This mosaic supports incredible biodiversity, notably rare and globally threatened and endemic species, including the Critically Endangered mountain gorilla.

The savanna areas are home to one of the world's highest densities of wildlife, with 218 mammal, 706 bird, 109 reptile and 78 amphibian species. Plant species number more than 2 000.

Apart from poaching and the increased presence of militia, threats facing Virunga include a growing human population, habitat destruction for fuel, and the keenness of international oil companies to explore for oil in the central area of the park.



job it is to secure the working environment and protect the dogs and handlers at all times.'

Prospective handlers also spent time in the classroom studying veterinary care, debriefing, report writing, sketching skills and advanced crime scene investigation strategies and tactics. Zähler was impressed with Virunga's rangers. 'Handling a bloodhound is difficult and takes a long time to learn,' she said. 'The handlers here are all strongly motivated and among the most talented and empathetic I have ever worked with. If it continues like this, we will succeed.'

Little did Zähler know that events in Virunga and eastern DRC would test the skills of the Congohounds just a year into their two-year training programme. On 3 March 2012, Emmanuel de Merode, director of the park, was doing an aerial reconnaissance when he spotted an elephant carcass, a victim of ivory poachers. Alerting stand-by rangers, he also called out the Congohounds for what he described as 'a big step, their first anti-poaching operation before completing full training'.

The dogs and their trainers arrived at the scene the next morning. The sight

that faced them was brutal and horrific; the elephant's face had been grotesquely hacked off to access its tusks. It had been dead for about five days and little was left by way of evidence: just a few broken branches and tracks trodden over by lions and hyaenas attracted to the rotting flesh.

The carcass was used as the scent item and the dogs picked up the by-now cold trail. They followed it for seven kilometres, closing in on Nyakakoma, a fishing village where the poachers were hiding out. Rangers later made armed contact with the suspects, who fled, leaving a cache of illegal weapons. ▶

ABOVE Stella and her handler Faustin Gakuru Senyamarwa form one of five Congohound teams that patrol Virunga National Park on the trail of poachers. Here they take a breather on the banks of the Ishasha River, keeping an eye on the resident hippos.

OPPOSITE Bloodhounds are able to pick up scents, even those that are days old, far more quickly and efficiently than any other mammal.

PAGE 26 Focused and tireless, a bloodhound follows a scent trail.



MARLENE ZÄHNER (2)

ABOVE Virunga's elephants, along with its mountain and eastern lowland gorillas and other species, are severely threatened.

BELOW Bloodhound trainer Marlene Zähler.



Helping Virunga's hounds

It costs US\$1 500 (almost R15 000) to support a Congohounds team (one dog, one ranger). For further information about the programme, the dogs and their trainers and how you can help, visit <http://congo-hounds.gorillacd.org>

The Congohounds' success demonstrated the effectiveness of their training and also cemented their role in what De Merode described as 'protecting Virunga's vulnerable elephant population as demands for ivory increase globally'. Indeed, an increasing number of elephants are being slaughtered for their tusks throughout Africa by well-armed criminal rings, which sell the ivory lucratively, especially to Asia. In Virunga alone, 500-plus elephants have been killed since 2008.

Unfortunately, the rise in elephant poaching isn't the only challenge Virunga has had to face. In April 2012, just a month after the Congohounds' first deployment, the M23 rebel movement started fighting government forces in the park, shattering the fragile peace that had been established in 2008 after the civil war in eastern DRC. No longer able to guarantee the safety of tourists, the authorities closed parts of the sanctuary.

By the next month, the violence had spread into the park and its gorilla sectors. Various militia groups, including Congolese anti-government rebels, Ugandan insurgents and displaced Rwandan forces implicated in the 1994 genocide in that country, established themselves in camps in the bush. They

carried out sustained artillery offensives against ranger quarters and killed animals to fill their bellies and raise funds for new weapons.

It has also been reported that one rebel group, working with a very small number of rangers who have defected from the park, is boosting its insurgency income by offering unofficial gorilla treks to tourists. De Merode has condemned this development in the strongest terms as 'putting the gorillas and the visitors at risk'. The situation in Virunga, which is still closed to visitors, has descended to a level of lawlessness that has seen yet more rangers killed or wounded as well as the temporary evacuation of villagers inside the park.

Despite this, and with bombs dropping around them, the training of the Congohounds continues. When it has been too dangerous to venture into the bush, further veterinary and tactical studies have been focused on in the classroom. Motivated and determined, the dog units are on permanent standby to protect the incredible wildlife of a unique national park that is Africa's oldest World Heritage Site. And against myriad complicated and deadly threats, none of its own making, Virunga needs its Congohounds more than ever. 